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KINGDOMS**
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REVIEW

EXCLUSIVE ACCESS

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IT'S BIGGER, BETTER,
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GEAR TEST

DOES BETTER KIT
MAKE YOU A
BETTER PLAYER?

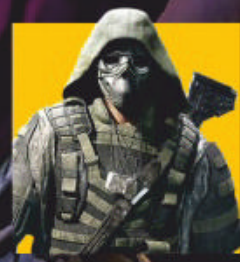
FUTURE
ISSUE 332



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“BORDERLANDS 3’S BIGGEST ACHIEVEMENT IS ITS COMBAT”



Whenever we publish our annual Top 100 list, there’s always one question we get asked: where’s *Borderlands 2*? The truth is, for everything that it does so well, Gearbox’s comedy loot-’em-up is just not one of the best shooters on PC. It’s sequel, though? It perhaps could be. Based on what I’ve played, *Borderlands 3*’s biggest achievement is its combat, which feels more

fluid, exciting and impactful than its predecessors. Find out more about Gearbox’s space-faring sequel over on page 40.

Elsewhere this issue, our massive, in-depth review of the long awaited *Total War: Three Kingdoms*. You’ll find that on page 66.

PHIL SAVAGE

Specialist in
Guns

Twitter
[@Octaeder](https://twitter.com/Octaeder)

This month
Endured much Claptrap to bring you this month’s cover feature.

Phil Savage

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The PC Gamer team



ANDY KELLY
Specialist in
Cops

Twitter
[@ultrabright](https://twitter.com/ultrabright)

This month
Became well acquainted with a police station (specifically the one from *Resident Evil 2*).



PHIL IWANIUK
Specialist in
Gains

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This month
Tried to improve his K:D ratio through a strict diet of RGB and esports branded gear.



JEREMY PEEL
Specialist in
Orcs

Twitter
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This month
Sacrificed many thousands of orcs in memory of a dying free-to-play game.



MALINDY HETFELD
Specialist in
Pirates

Twitter
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This month
Was diagnosed with an obsession to *Curse of Monkey Island*. The treatment? A Reinstall.

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JULY 2019

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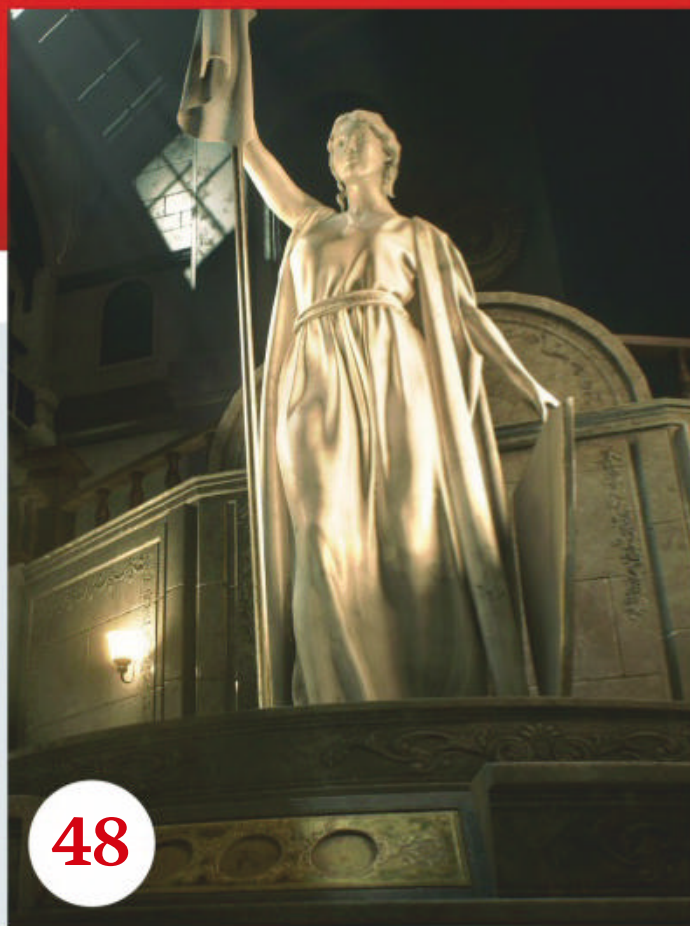
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MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



WALKOUT AT RIOT

Employees at the **LEAGUE OF LEGENDS** creator protest forced arbitration

Following a report by Kotaku on the endemic sexism at Riot Games last August, the company announced actions to improve its culture. Several months later a number of Riot employees filed lawsuits against their employer for gender discrimination. Riot responded by pointing out its mandatory arbitration clause, effectively blocking court proceedings.

Over 150 employees left their workplace both to protest forced arbitration, a practice in which a private arbitrator settles disputes

instead of a court judge, and the ongoing problems at Riot. Arbitration differs from court procedures in that they're confidential and parties choose arbitrators themselves, which means they're not necessarily impartial. Most importantly, arbitration rulings aren't legally

**PLAINTIFFS ALLEGE
THAT THE EVERYDAY
ATMOSPHERE AT RIOT
HASN'T IMPROVED**

binding. Since the original Kotaku report, Riot has taken measures to combat sexism, including hiring chief diversity officer Angela Roseboro. However the plaintiffs allege that the everyday atmosphere at Riot hasn't improved – they described being required to take on additional roles without remuneration and enduring sexual objectification, which includes email chains rating female Riot employees. Additionally the lawsuits detail discriminating hiring procedures and a gender pay gap.

To some of the protesting employees, refusing to settle these issues in court goes against Riot's commitment to prevent

ELECTRIC THREE

PCGS 2019



We're less than a month away from the ridiculous spectacle of E3. This year's show will likely be dominated by talk of the next console generation, but PC fans still have lots to look forward to, including our own PC Gaming Show, which will be streaming on Twitch on June 10, 6pm BST. ■ **PS**

DOG DAYS

JOHN WICK HEX



Action movie series John Wick is being turned into a game. Called *John Wick Hex* and developed by Bithell Games, it's a fast-paced turn-based strategy game, which feels like a perfect fit for the dog-loving assassin's brand of choreographed, gun-based action. ■ **AK**



FORCEFUL ENTRANCE

FALLEN ORDER



Respawn is set to reveal *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order* footage at EA's E3 conference. I, forever thirsting for a current gen single player Star Wars experience, am unabashedly excited. It's a) Star Wars, a universe all but tailor-made for games and b) Respawn has yet to let me down. ■ **MH**



ABOVE: *League of Legends* remains an esports favourite.

LEFT: Riot still prefers new hires to be core *LoL* players.

discrimination and to elicit real change. Some participants of the walkout expressed their wish to show solidarity with the plaintiffs. Others wished to voice their dissatisfaction at the current state of affairs, as several executives mentioned for their questionable behaviour in the initial report still remain at Riot.

A BALANCED RIOT

Following the announcement of the walkout in late April, Riot outlined some upcoming 30, 60 and 90-day plans to update their code of conduct in a blog post entitled "Our Commitments on Arbitration and Next Steps for [Diversity & Inclusion]". The blog post states that after current litigation is resolved, new hires will have the opportunity to opt out of mandatory arbitration for individual sexual assault and sexual harassment claims. In this case forced arbitration would still apply to claims for other forms of harassment, discrimination, retaliation and wages due, all of which are explicitly listed in Riot contracts according to Kotaku. With the new measures Riot plans to accelerate diversity and inclusion efforts such as anti-harassment training, previously announced in February 2019, and a pay equity analysis, among others. The organisers of the walkout, however, are calling for the end of forced arbitration for all current employees and contractors, and have announced further action should Riot not commit to changing its stance on arbitration.

The Riot walkout is not the first of its kind in the gaming industry but it is the first protest of this scale to address the company culture and gender disparity at a studio. That Riot dropped the ball on its D&I measures again doesn't leave one particularly hopeful, but the continued scrutiny on the company may yet turn the tide. **Malindy Hetfeld**

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Minecraft

Thanks to a huge content update, *Minecraft* now has villages, pandas, many new blocks and more.

Platinum Games

Hinted at two new games, describing them as something that's "never been designed before". Ambitious!

Microsoft

Published charmingly old-fashioned examples of acceptable trash talk, including "get wrecked".

Randy Pitchford

The Gearbox CEO is having a *month* on Twitter, first with a kerfuffle over microtransactions in *Borderlands 3*, followed by assault claims.

Echo Fox

Former NBA pro Rick Fox is leaving esports organisation Echo Fox over an investor's racial slur.

The Sonic Movie

Since Sonic looks about as bad as expected, he's getting a redesign.

LOWS



The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

Congratulations, reader, you have caught The Spy in a nostalgic mood. Let us journey together on a trip through time, back to the carefree days of mid-to-late 2016. You do remember 2016, right? It'd be understandable if you didn't. The Spy has long theorised that information has a sort of emotional mass, and that its unchecked dissemination in the internet age has caused – and excuse the technical jargon – a gravitational clusterfuck of hot takes so dense it dilates time itself. And that's why 2016 feels like it was over a decade ago.

A refresher then: *that* presidential election, Captain America: Civil War, *that* referendum, Damn Daniel, “Ima fix wolves”. More relevant to our interests, 2016 was also a time of rampant rumourmongering around Rockstar's much anticipated wild west adventure sequel. Every month, it seemed, a new scrap of information was regurgitated by web writers desperate to feed their SEO-starved audience. “Have these clouds arranged into an accurate rendition of *Red Dead Redemption 2*'s map?” “Does the soundtrack to Paul Blart: Mall Cop 2 reveal the existence of a *Red Dead Redemption 2* release date?” “Will the story of *Red Dead Redemption 2* be a savage indictment of Friedrich Engels' The

Condition of the Working Class in England?” You know, that sort of thing. Was any of it credible? It hardly mattered. The content will out.

Three years later, and the world has changed. It's like a gritty reboot: darker, stranger, hornier. And yet, even today, rumours that *RDR2* will come to PC persist. Recently, a Reddit user posted the LinkedIn profile of Nan Ma, former physics programmer for Rockstar Toronto. A now deleted entry in Ma's list of work referenced “*Red Dead Redemption 2* (PS4, XBI, PC)”.

But does the world need a PC version of *Red Dead Redemption 2*? After all, thanks to last year's console release, the game has already been thoroughly dissected on social media. Every opinion has already been fed to the void mass of knowledge. Given that, is there any point even playing it? The Spy would say yes, not least because The Spy has personally and painstakingly blocked every single Twitter user in order to protest the idea that a game's shelf life is only as long as its spot in an algorithmic trending list. Also because *RDR2* offers an amazing, world full of things to discover and rabbits to skin.

VALVE TIME

Now let us journey back further, to the year 2007, which – under the rules of The Spy's Theory of Informational Relativity – happened about a century ago. If you don't believe The Spy, how else do you explain 2007 being the year rickrolling was invented? It was also the year *Half-Life 2: Episode Two* was released, and thus the first year someone first asked when *Episode Three* would be out. The answer, as we all know, is heavy, uncontrollable sobbing. And yet, there's still hope. Valve's new VR system, Index, will ship on July 1. And, “later this year”, Valve says it will release a “flagship VR game” to support it.

What will it be? Well, last year, an anonymous source told UploadVR that one of Valve's upcoming VR projects was a *Half-Life* prequel. And *that* means there's an infinitesimally small chance you could be playing a new *Half-Life* game by the end of the year. Whenever that is. Spy out. ■
The Spy

THREE YEARS LATER, AND THE WORLD HAS CHANGED. IT'S LIKE A GRITTY REBOOT

THE SPY
The Spy knows the secret to time travel. It's called waiting.

This month in... 2009



1 The late-'00s were rough for PC enthusiasts, but this issue shows signs of what would become a massive upswing in the popularity of desktop gaming. It features both *Left 4 Dead 2* and *Stalker: Call of Pripjat*. These are both great games that highlight the PC's greatest strengths: be it a commitment to a specific vision, or just support for hundreds of silly mods.

ISSUE
202, July 2009
ON THE COVER
Left 4 Dead 2
IN THE CHARTS
Mama Do – Pixie Lott

2 The review section is no slouch either, thanks to *Arma II*'s brilliantly in-depth war simming (and AI issues), and *The Sims III*'s celebration of soap opera drama.



3 Also in this issue, *PC Gamer* looked ahead to gaming's biggest secrets: those rumoured releases that were still many years out. Some, like the *StarCraft MMO* or *Total World War*, just didn't happen. Others, like *Elite 4* and *Hitman 5*, wouldn't arrive until well into the next decade. And some, like *Half-Life 2: Episode Three*, exist now primarily as a meme.



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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES

The forests of the Hirschfelden reserve are broken up by cornfields.

CREATING NATURE

THE HUNTER: CALL OF THE WILD devs create the prettiest forests

You wouldn't expect a niche hunting game to feature some of the most realistic natural environments on PC. *The Hunter: Call of the Wild*, developed by Avalanche, features a series of massive, gorgeous hunting reserves – from the grassy plains of Africa and the lush forests of Germany to the frozen wilds of Siberia – and they're all stunningly beautiful to look at.

The game is developed by a small team, yet despite having a fraction of the budget of something like, say, *Far Cry*, its landscapes are above and beyond anything I've seen in any other game. And as I wandered the autumnal forests of Hirschfelden, I wondered: how did they do it?

"A lot of trying and failing," says Peppe Pihl, world designer. "Research and more research. Blood, sweat, and tears. I was born on the mountainside and, like many others at Avalanche, I love being in nature. It's easier to make a forest feel convincing when you know the environment like the back of your hand."

"Usually in games nature is a backdrop," he continues. "Something you don't necessarily explore. But in *Call of the Wild* it's the opposite. Nature is where everything happens. We spent a lot of time creating tools to develop what we've envisioned. But really it all boils down to craftsmanship and passion."

SURROUND SOUND

Another part of the game's magic is the sound design. Rather than just loop a recording of a forest, the game uses dynamic environmental audio to give the impression of being outdoors. There's no music in the game, and it doesn't need it. The ambient sound really draws you into the world, from distant animal calls to the sound of the wind gently rustling the trees.

"For the sound design, a lot of hard work and careful consideration goes into the process, coupled with the strength of the Apex engine for creating open worlds," says Mattias Wennlund, sound designer. "We always need to start with good source recordings of natural sounds. We then need to edit those recordings to capture the essence of the place. To get those files to play back in a believable way, we need them to ebb and flow like sounds do in nature in real life. In addition the sounds need to feel like they're coming from a place in the world, from the context they are in."

Wennlund explains that, for tree sounds, the engine takes into account if the wind is blowing, the altitude, and its distance from the player. "A tree right next to you will sound different from one 300 metres away," he says. "We also research the fauna of each reserve to represent it in a believable way. As an example, all the birds in Parque Fernando are native to that region."



Hunting party

Expansive Worlds, the team behind *The Hunter*, is an independently operated subsidiary of Avalanche Studios. It released its first game in 2009, an online-activated hunting sim called *The Hunter*. In 2017 it released the sequel, *Call of the Wild*, which is now the team's main focus. In 2019, Expansive Worlds also released *Generation Zero*.



FAR LEFT: Certain, more reclusive animals can only be found in forests.

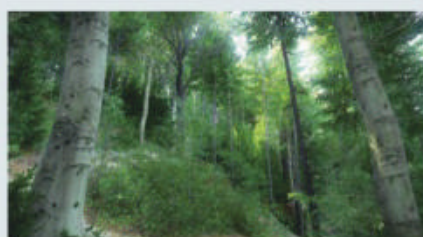
LEFT: The Vurhonga DLC map is set on a beautiful African savannah.

NATURE CALLS *Other great videogame forests*



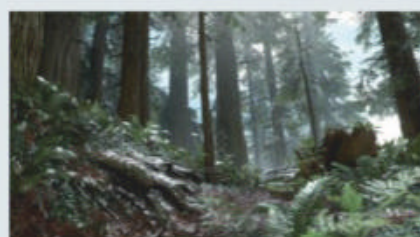
ALAN WAKE

Set in the Pacific Northwest, this Twin Peaks-inspired horror game features some deep, spooky forests.



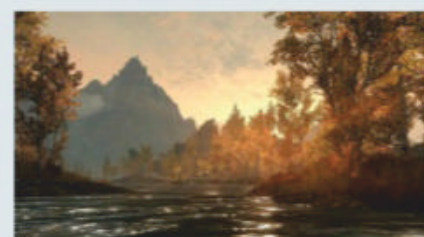
KINGDOM COME: DELIVERANCE

The kingdom of Bohemia's forests are second only to *The Hunter's* in terms of atmosphere and density.



STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT

Dice used a technique called photogrammetry to perfectly recreate the forest-covered moon of Endor.



SKYRIM

There are a lot of forests in *Skyrim*, but the autumnal trees and mountain flowers of the Rift are the highlight.

As for the sheer scale of these 16 x 16km maps, the small team at Avalanche relies partly on procedural generation. "A few locations are hand-crafted, usually buildings and other man-made structures," says Kevin Darnis. "But for the most part the landscapes are procedurally generated, because the maps are so big. First, Peppe creates a terrain and from there I use a tool to procedurally distribute materials across it."

"There are certainly a lot of procedural aspects in our game," says Peppe Pihl. "It's one of the reasons we can create these massive worlds with just a couple of people. Imagine placing all those trees by hand! Same goes for the 'need zones' of the animals. We have hundreds of thousands of them in each reserve, and we use rules to generate them in an efficient way."

"There's no magic 'create world' button. All the rules leading up to the procedural results we get have been carefully designed. However, we have adjusted several spots where animal and player interactions were not ideal. Sometimes we get the result we want with procedural content, but if there's a problem we solve it with good old-fashioned manual labour."

SNAP HAPPY

When I play *The Hunter*, I often find myself completely ignoring the hunting aspect of the game and just enjoying existing in the world, taking screenshots with the in-game camera. With a good pair of headphones you can really get swept up in the atmosphere of the reserves, and it's

possible, I think, to enjoy the game without firing a single bullet from your rifle.

"This makes us really happy, because immersion is one of the core pillars of our open world," says Philipp Strecker, product owner. "The team has worked hard to get the frequency of finding animal tracks just right, so the investment pays off when you track one for a while. This puts the environments at the forefront and we love seeing the screenshots people have taken."

Aware of the many different ways people play *The Hunter*, Avalanche is always thinking about new systems to incorporate into the game. I ask Philipp Strecker if the studio has thought about expanding the photography aspect of the game.

"We'd love to do this, and the development team has discussed it ever since the game started a few years back," he says. "You can really get some fantastic

shots when the weather, nature, and animals line up nicely and we've been blown away by some of the community's screenshots. It's all about the interplay of the tools we give to the player and the moments that emerge from that. We've also discussed birdwatching, which would open up a new way to experience the game."

The Hunter: Call of the Wild is a brilliant example of the kind of wildly immersive, ultra-specific sim games you only find on PC, and it's amazing how much graphical and audio fidelity such a small team has managed to squeeze out of the Apex engine. ■

Andy Kelly

"THE TEAM HAS WORKED HARD TO GET THE FREQUENCY OF FINDING ANIMAL TRACKS JUST RIGHT"

In Focus

THE HIDDEN DETAILS OF DESIGN



CRASH, BANG, WALLOP

Game director Ross Gowing on how Codemasters creates realistic damage in **DIRT RALLY 2.0**. *By Andy Kelly*

SURVIVAL SIMULATOR

1 “Damage is part and parcel of real life rally. Drivers constantly have to overcome mechanical failure and impact damage to make it to the end of the stage, and we wanted our players to experience that.”

UNDER THE HOOD

2 “Punctures and damaged wheels have an obvious effect on your handling, but we model a great deal under the hood too. If you damage your radiator, your engine will overheat and your performance will suffer.”

THE REAL THING

3 “We work closely with real rally car manufacturers. Some request that certain parts of the bodywork never detach during accidents, and they all make it clear that the driver cell should never be damaged in a crash.”

SLIDING DOORS

4 “Damage is accurate to what you impact with. If you slide sideways into a lamp post, damage is confined to that area of the car. But if you slide into a wall you’ll take impact across the entire side of the vehicle.”

SOURCE MATERIAL

5 “We carefully study photo and video reference material to see how different bodywork materials deform and dent, and details such as how a car’s bumper will behave when it’s clinging on to a single mounting point.”

FUTURE PROOF

6 “Over the years the underlying mechanical damage systems have been greatly improved, and now we’re able to represent relationships between components and knock-on effects better than we ever have before.”



LEFT: You can smash through some scenery with only minor damage, such as a cracked windscreen. But if you slam into a rock wall or a vehicle, you’re probably gonna sustain some internal damage.

BELOW: If an impact is particularly hard, it’s enough to cause terminal vehicle damage and get you disqualified from the round. Less serious damage can be repaired mid race, but it will impact your final time.



TEACHING MOMENTS

How developers build the tutorials you skip. *By Xalavier Nelson Jr*

Luca Redwood makes puzzle games. Quite good ones, if the reception of *You Must Build a Boat* and *10,000,000* are anything to go by. His new game, *Photographs*, is a narrative puzzle adventure that uses adaptive tutorials. Nothing is revealed about what you're supposed to do or how you're supposed to do it unless you trigger invisible code that reveals a specific bit of information. The vast majority of instruction doesn't use text for a simple reason, "Some people will read your text," Redwood says, "but most won't."

It's a common piece of knowledge in development circles that no matter how important it is, many players will avoid or miss pieces of your tutorial. They clearly need to know how to play the game – how do you move past their natural reluctance with as much success as possible?

"A lot of designers talk about how certain types of tutorials don't respect the player's intelligence, but I think these designers work on games that can afford to leave a lot of players behind," says Bobby Lockhart, who specialises in educational games and is the lead developer of indie game *Codemancer*. "As a designer of learning

games I don't really have that luxury, so I try to include as many ways of teaching as is feasible." Lockhart identified a sequence necessary to bring players through a learning process successfully: teaching them *why* they're doing things, *what* they'll be doing, and *how* to do them. "It's very tempting to introduce these things in the opposite order, since players often seem to just want to dive in," Lockhart says. "Sometimes you can get away with that, especially if the game has been heavily marketed, is a sequel, or just exists within a well-worn genre, where the 'why' and the 'what' are known before the player sits down to play."

This makes the work of Zachtronics all the more impressive.

Zachtronics is the studio behind logic games including *Opus Magnum* and *Exapunks*. Considering the complexity and unique interaction systems in these games, it seems like it would be easy to lose players on the first level. "Our

first commercial game was *SpaceChem*, which included a 'tutorial' that took the form of text and pictures presented before puzzles," says Zachtronics founder Zach Barth.

"It was not very good," he continued. "The takeaway for us was that, rather than trying to design tutorials, we should be designing 'experimentation zones' where players can figure out mechanics through trial-and-error

in a scaffolded fashion, rather than having to trial-and-error everything at once. Sometimes we still include textual explanations, which are always disappointingly ineffective. And sometimes we use examples,

particularly in our puzzle games, where I like to put a solved puzzle on-screen next to an unsolved puzzle."

TRIAL-AND-ERROR

Developers require this trial-and-error as much as players do. Among the elements of a game that require extensive iteration leading up to release, tutorials rank among the most time-intensive – particularly when they're woven into the fabric of the experience itself. "As soon as the game has mechanics, we start building tutorials!" says *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* creative director Kevin Zuhn. "We have UI pop-ups to tell players the control input – hold left mouse to raise your left leg – and their goal – walk across the room. That's the most brute-force method. The rest we teach through the level's design."

Player behaviour and assumptions play a major role in this iteration. Streamers read every section of the *Sunless Skies* Early Access tutorial as if it was an essential part of the experience, making the first 30 minutes of footage a slog for viewers and the distraught, watching developers. The final version saw heavy changes that bent it towards a "concise, story-driven introductory experience," according to narrative director Chris Gardiner.

Chris Wilson, design director of 2D stealth game *Siege and the Sandfox*, found players at games conferences would try to play their game like an action platformer based on its appearance and become frustrated. "We placed enemies that would kill the player almost instantly if they just tried to run through. After that initial encounter, we're actually much more forgiving. Once their expectations had been brutally recalibrated, the existing tutorials did their job."

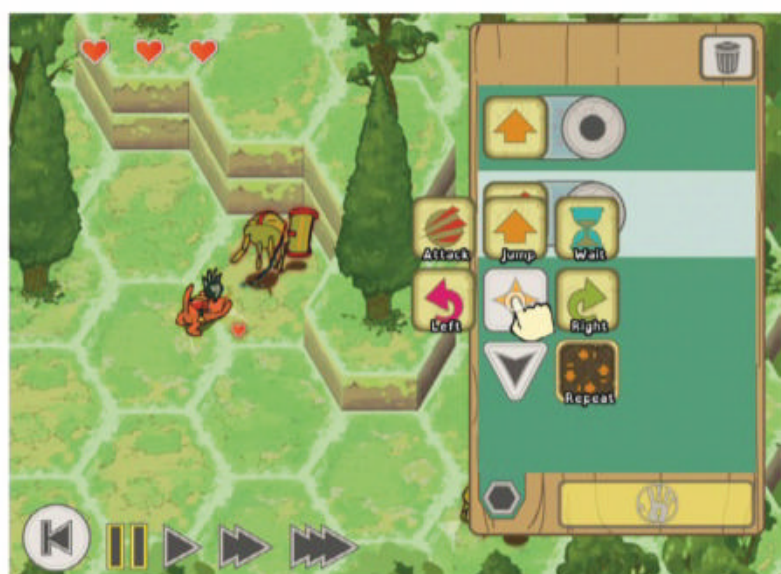
Tutorials are more than text and instruction. They're an entire way of thinking built around the player's introduction to the critical pieces of a game. Maybe you'll remember that next time you skip one. You monster. ■

XALAVIER NELSON JR
I'm a full-time game writer and narrative designer, with credits inside and out of gaming.





Setting the tutorial of *Octodad* at the main character's wedding gave developer Young Horses the ability to set up their premise and mechanics in a self-contained space at the same time.



FAR LEFT: *Codemancer* developer Bobby Lockhart specialises in educational games.

LEFT: The tutorials in narrative puzzle game *Photographs* are adaptive, revealing no instructions about the controls or mechanics unless a player needs them.

SAFE SPACES *Here are a few of my favourite spaces that give you a chance to practice your skills*



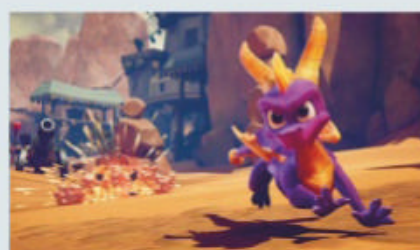
WEST OF LOATHING

The first town is a microcosm of the entire game, with choices and secrets packed into a tiny footprint set early enough that you can decide whether the character you created is right for you.



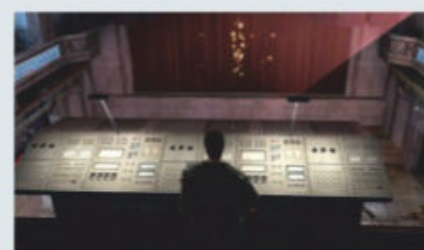
THE EVIL WITHIN 2

The underrated survival horror game embeds optional tutorials. This boxcar encounter alone teaches about concepts like traps, upgrade materials, and escaping horrifying monstrosities.



SPYRO: REIGNITED TRILOGY

The hub locations of 3D platformers like the *Spyro* trilogy are beloved for a reason. They give players, especially younger ones, a safe place to practice platforming skills and new abilities.



MAX PAYNE

A snow-covered New York street is the perfect place to learn how *Max Payne's* abrupt, balletic combat works. You spawn enemies from a button on a wall, and take them down. Forever.

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PREVIEW



Ghost Recon Breakpoint

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
October 4

DEVELOPER
Ubisoft Paris

PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

LINK
www.ghostrecon.com

GHOST RECON
BREAKPOINT

The hunter becomes the hunted

This brand new *Ghost Recon* game begins with that old military videogame favourite – the helicopter crash. High above the jungles of the Aurora archipelago – a remote chain of islands in the Pacific – a swarm of... *something* attacks your chopper, and the fact it seems to be targeting you, suggests it might be something more sinister.

The Aurora archipelago is home to Skell Technology, a massive corporation that makes everything from home computers to automated war machines. It's the latter, a growing threat to the world, that brings the Ghosts here. Despite being a relatively small archipelago, Aurora contains several diverse biomes including forests, deserts, an active volcano, and snowy mountains. It makes no geographical sense, and call me a cynic, but it feels like an environment that's been tailor-made for a battle royale mode. Such a mode hasn't been confirmed (or hinted at) by Ubisoft yet, but come on, it is 2019.

The Ghosts' plan to infiltrate under cover of darkness and rescue a Skell engineer is scuppered by that bizarre swarm, which is a little bit like something out of *Lost*. *Breakpoint* is set in the near future, and although not as fantastically futuristic as something like *Future Soldier*, this world's technology is far in advance of our own. And, yes, there are drones: flying ones, ones that roll around on wheels, and ones you can use to scout a location and mark enemies. Ubisoft's love affair with drones is far from over, and they're actually central to the plot in *Breakpoint*.

As your chopper burns you limp away from the flaming wreckage and find yourself behind enemy lines, poorly equipped, injured, and hunted. An enemy militia calling themselves the Wolves are aware of your presence on Aurora, and

they've painted a target on your back. These cloaked, mask-wearing soldiers are every bit as well-trained as you are, making them a formidable foe. The idea of *Breakpoint* is to put you on the back foot, to make even a super-soldier like a Ghost feel like they're struggling to survive. As you explore the game's giant open world, completing missions and engaging in guerrilla warfare, the Wolves are always hot on your heels.

BIG BAD

The group is led by Cole D. Walker, a former Ghost turned villain who is played by Jon Bernthal, who you may recognise from *The Punisher* on Netflix. Walker was recently introduced in a free *Wildlands* mission called Operation Oracle, in which he was ostensibly a good guy. But now he's in full-on villain mode, leading the Wolves in their charge against you. Ubisoft says story is much more important this time around. And while I don't think this series necessarily needs one, it's encouraging to see the developer taking strides to make this aspect of the game more compelling.

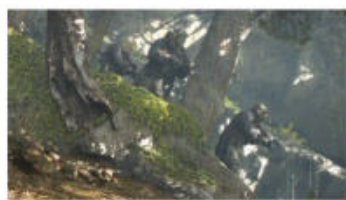
I must say, though, a flashback cutscene between Walker and returning *Wildlands* character Nomad (the one with the beard and the baseball cap) has a very weird tone. The two characters have a relaxed conversation – the kind you'd have with an old friend in a quiet bar. But as they chat they're using a sniper rifle to casually shoot unidentified enemies in the head. One bullet doesn't quite land, and Nomad finishes the crawling enemy off with all the emotion of someone scrubbing a toilet. I don't know if this scene is supposed to make them look like badasses, or get across the idea that soldiers are people doing a job. But our alleged hero's cavalier attitude to death, which seems to be at least partly played for laughs, is just a bit gross, really.

But back to the game itself, because honestly, who's going to be paying attention to the story. This isn't *The Wire*, >

PLAYED
ITYOU LIMP AWAY FROM THE
FLAMING WRECKAGE AND FIND
YOURSELF BEHIND ENEMY LINES

PREVIEW

Ghost Recon Breakpoint



A high-tech Skell
Tech laboratory.



A team of Wolves
accompanied by a drone.

➤ it's a military shooter. To reinforce the idea of being in a desperate survival situation – that you're not a bulletproof '80s action hero – *Breakpoint* introduces a few interesting new features, including the ability to sustain injuries. If you take a bullet in the leg you'll limp until you can set up a bivouac in the wilderness, craft a bandage, and heal it. Or if your arm is injured, the steadiness of your aim will be negatively affected.

In the open world these injuries will be relatively easy to fix, but in the thick of a firefight they could be a big problem.

The way the characters move has also been tweaked to add to the sense of struggle. Additional weight and momentum has been added to the movement controls, making climbing up steep slopes and across rough terrain a chore for the Ghosts. This will eat away at their stamina – a meter you'll have to manage as you traverse the world. Luckily there are plenty of land, sea, and air vehicles to commandeer if you don't feel like walking, including a much larger selection of high-tech military vehicles – something many *Ghost Recon* fans felt were sorely missing from *Wildlands*.

I get a feel for the game myself in a brief 15-minute co-op demo, which sees the Ghosts infiltrating a modern-looking office building to extract a scientist. We begin by tossing our drones into the air and scanning the exterior of the structure, tagging enemies, and deciding over our headsets what our plan of action will be. We decide to go in stealthy, and I use my sniper scope to pick off a few lone enemies who are out of sight of their allies. We move slowly towards the building together, avoiding civilians who, although harmless, can go into a panic and alert nearby enemies to our location.

We move methodically through the building, picking off guards, until we reach the upstairs office of our scientist.

During a conversation with her, I notice that there are dialogue options – another example of the game's increased story focus. They aren't wildly different, however, which makes me wonder just how much scope for role-playing there will actually be. I press a button to rescue the scientist, which involves Nomad swiftly

knocking her out with a punch and slinging her over his shoulder. Was that entirely necessary? It felt like an animation that would play when you take down an enemy, not a civilian you're supposed to be taking care of.

Incidentally, this is one of the new features in *Breakpoint*. Bodies can now be picked up and moved around. This will be useful for stealth, letting you shift fallen enemies out of the way of nosy guards. But it also works for your teammates in co-op, letting you ferry them to safety before healing them. Not exactly a revolutionary feature, but it should add an extra layer of interactivity and depth to the stealth aspect of the game, and make dealing with injured allies in co-op a lot easier. *Breakpoint* has been designed with both co-op and singleplayer in mind. Interestingly, if you play solo there are no AI squad-mates – you team up with a drone instead.

Just as we're about to whisk the snoozing scientist away to safety, the shit hits the fan. Despite our stealthy infiltration, the dreaded Wolves show up. But I was a little disappointed with them. They can kill you in a couple of hits, which forces you to stick religiously to cover, but other than that, they moved and fought exactly like the other grunts we'd killed earlier. I mean, they look intimidating with their hoods and masks, but I didn't get the sense that I was battling some elite special forces group – just regular soldiers with a cooler aesthetic. I think things will get more interesting when you fight the lieutenants, who have unique powers and personalities similar to *Metal Gear Solid* bosses. But I didn't encounter them here.

INTEL INSIDE

Moment to moment, it doesn't feel that different from *Wildlands*. The planning phase of the mission, the infiltration of the office building, all felt very familiar. I did like the increased weight of the character movement, however. And the promise that mission objectives will have to be discovered by following intel, rather than marked on your map, sounds intriguing. *Breakpoint* has some interesting ideas, but it also feels like a game designed to tick as many boxes as possible: crafting, survival, open world, co-op, and so on. It's so all-encompassing, in fact, that it's hard to pinpoint what *Breakpoint* will do better than any other open world game. But maybe I'm asking too much of a military shooter like *Ghost Recon*.

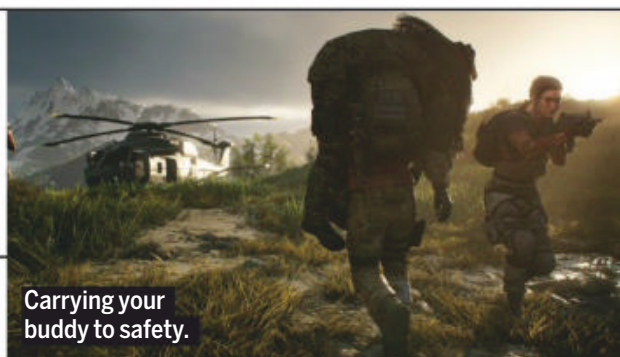
Andy Kelly

MOMENT TO MOMENT, IT DOESN'T FEEL THAT DIFFERENT FROM WILDLANDS

Ghost Recon Breakpoint



Getting up close and personal.



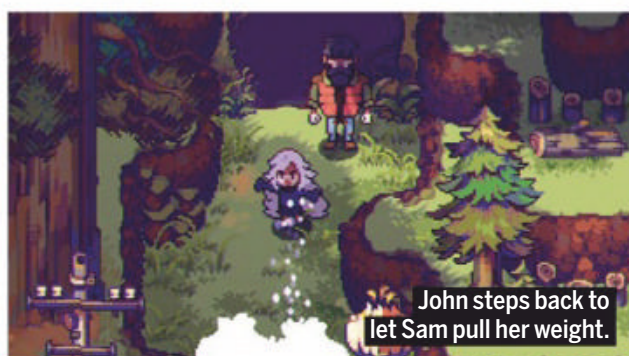
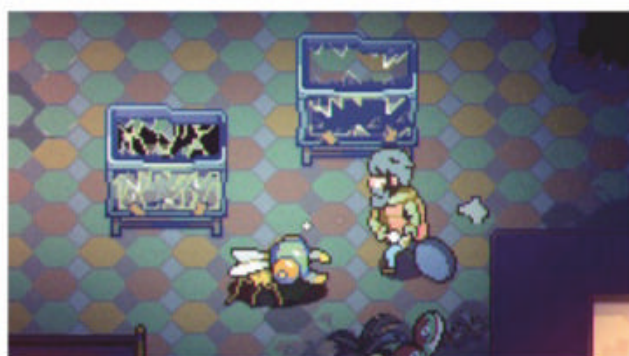
Carrying your buddy to safety.



PREVIEW

Eastward

Eastward is chock-full of beautiful details and interesting characters.



John steps back to let Sam pull her weight.

The architecture portrays a hopeful post-apocalypse.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Pixpil

PUBLISHER
Chucklefish

LINK
www.eastwardgame.com

EASTWARD

A trip back to the golden age of Asian RPGs

One look at *Eastward*, and you can immediately tell what made the pixel art aficionados at Chucklefish fall in love with it. From colourful environments filled with detail to the unique characters softly bouncing with each breath, *Eastward* feels alive, even though it's set in a world that's anything but.

With *Eastward*, developer Pixpil has decided to go all out – the first project for the Shanghai-based team is looking to Japanese RPGs from the late '80s and early '90s for inspiration, a genre that originated enduring videogame characters and approaches to adventure gameplay. You take control of John and Sam, a taciturn miner and a small girl with a magnificent mane of white hair. Together they travel a post-apocalyptic world. Pixpil is staying as tight-lipped as John about any plot details, but they did let slip that the fact that Sam uses magic makes her someone really special.

SUNSHINE STATES

The warm feel to Pixpil's version of the apocalypse is a deliberate choice, as Pixpil co-founder and lead artist Hong Moran explains, "People, including us, tend to romanticise old worlds as something in which myths can be found and unfolded. This feeling is a major reason we chose to create a post-apocalyptic world and also why it doesn't feel too downtrodden."

What I saw of the game was a mix of straight-forward puzzling with combat

similar to action RPGs such as *Fable*. To take on the monsters freely roaming the world, I can switch between both characters at any time – John wields a shotgun and is also very handy with a frying pan. Sam's magic is useful at long range. To navigate a forest full of flesh-eating plants and wild animals, I also need to solve the occasional puzzle. John can clear away obstacles like debris using bombs, certain plants react only to being zapped with Sam's magic. Using a combination of my new bestie, the frying pan, and Sam's magic, I navigate a raft past obstacles and into a cave, where a boss waits for me. Pixpil's narrative designer Pan Chen tells me that players will be able to find more weapons in the finished game that will allow them to progress to previously inaccessible locations. According to Tommo Zhou, Pixpil founder and *Eastward*'s producer, the goal is ultimately to keep things simple, "Players get limited upgrades and new items throughout the game, but we want to ensure everything stays fun and intuitive. Rather than bog you down with stuff, we want to incorporate how you can switch between John and Sam into a variety of puzzles."

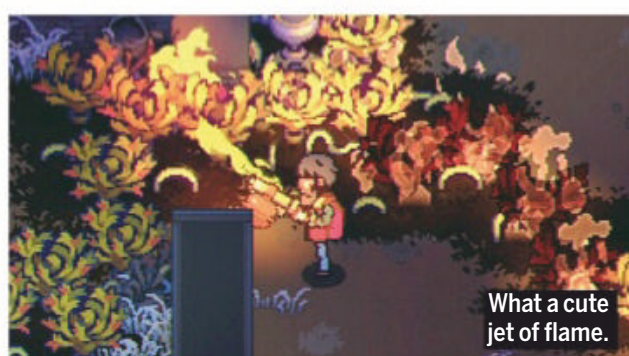
PLAYED
IT

ASIAN PERSUASION

The Japanese flair of the city I saw in the demo is so strong I asked if Pixpil has brought more of their native Shanghai to the game. According to Zhou and Moran, this particular in-game town with its trams and wooden sliding doors is inspired by Showa and Taisho-era Japan, and you'll also be able to visit areas reminiscent of Hong Kong and Shanghai and find architecture inspired by South Korea and India. As much as I love the Japanese architecture I've seen in the demo, it's always interesting to find locations in games inspired by the fantastical.

Apart from JRPGs, Pixpil also definitely know their anime and has been inspired by an eclectic list of titles, including *Akira*, *Macross*, and works by Studio Ghibli. Pixpil has a grand vision – even with how little it's revealed, particularly in terms of narrative, it sounds like a tall order. I'm all for more developers from different countries reaching westwards and curious to see how it'll all come together.

Malindy Hetfeld



What a cute jet of flame.

JOHN WIELDS A SHOTGUN AND IS ALSO VERY HANDY WITH A FRYING PAN

PREVIEW

Beyond Blue

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2019

DEVELOPER
E-Line Media

PUBLISHER
E-Line Media

LINK
www.beyondbluegame.com

BEYOND BLUE

PLAYED
IT

Beneath the waves with the ocean game's new biome

An octopus hiding from a shark within a protective suit of shells then jetting away was a standout moment in *Blue Planet II*, the BBC's spectacular underwater documentary series. That octopus' inclusion in the demo of *Beyond Blue*, E-Line Media's underwater adventure, nods to the game's relationship with the show, using its insight and spectacle to build *Beyond Blue*'s world.

The latest demo is set in the atoll biome. It's far more colourful than the murky twilight zone of the previous build, and a rainbow of corals and fish bask in the sunlight shallower water offers. The full game will also feature a third biome – the deep sea abyss where the only source of light is bioluminescence.

Researcher Mirai and her team have been called to the South China Sea to investigate unusual biological activity and this new demo intro tells me I'm trailing a superpod of sperm whales, hoping to discover more about their social and emotional lives.

My task here is fairly straightforward – head to a series of buoys and use them

to lock onto nearby sounds. Once I know the location of the sound I go and see what's making it. As I swim Mirai chats with her remote team so you get a growing sense of those relationships even though you won't see the people.

VP of marketing, Steve Zimmerman, tells me that the full game will also have a submarine. The sub is where you make the bigger narrative decisions so as not to distract you while swimming. When you're swimming about, the priority is immersion in the moment-to-moment thrills.

WHALE OF A TIME

Beyond Blue won't shy away from issues like coral bleaching and plastic pollution but it will be able to use its setting – 20 years in the future – to explore possible solutions. Zimmerman also mentions other decisions Mirai will face around who to share her research with, whether that's the whole world, a specific country, or a commercial enterprise.

I ask Zimmerman for his favourite ocean fact and he responds with something science can't answer yet. "I want to know why the humpbacks sing," he says. "[We] haven't learned why, and our game's probably not going to answer that question. But we're hoping to inspire another generation of people who might start looking into things like that."

Philippa Warr

THE SUB IS WHERE YOU MAKE THE BIGGER NARRATIVE DECISIONS

INDUSTRIAL GRADE TEK

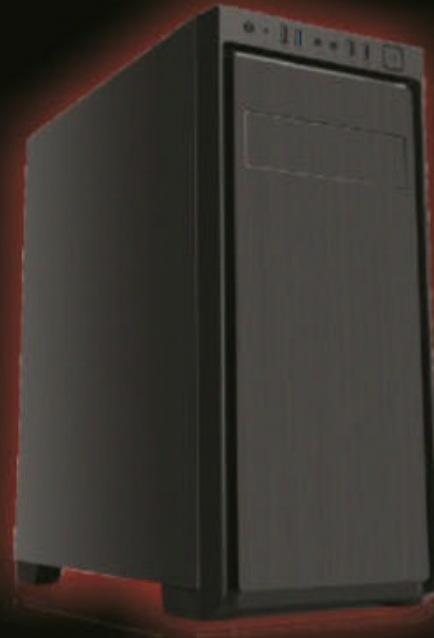
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GAMING UT-3



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GAMING UT-4



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PREVIEW

Partisans 1941

The level of detail is incredible, like the smashed window panes here.

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBC

DEVELOPER
Alter Games

PUBLISHER
TBC

LINK
partisans-game.com/en

PARTISANS 1941

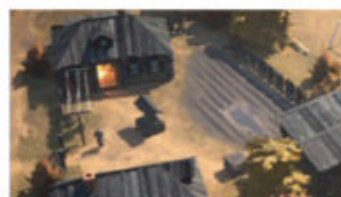
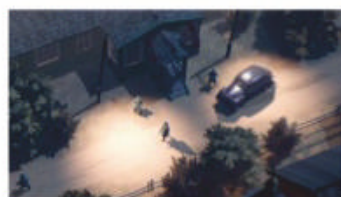
Did someone say *Commandos*?

If you're as old as me, you might remember repeatedly playing the contents of every PC magazine cover disk going, mostly because you couldn't afford to actually buy any new games. And the PC demo that I got the most mileage out of by far was one for *Commandos: Beyond the Call of Duty*.

PLAYED
IT

This one-level demo was brutally hard and suitably enormous. Your four-person squad was tasked with infiltrating and destroying a Nazi stronghold, mostly by creeping up on soldiers unawares and giving them a right good stabbing, then carefully stashing their body in a bush.

Progress was painstakingly slow, but utterly riveting. As your squad crept from cover to cover, just beyond the range of the guards' cone of vision, you could cut the tension with a knife (pun intended). It was glorious. It took me four days to finish that demo level, and it was one of the high points in my PC gaming life.



At first glance *Partisans 1941* appears to be cut from a very similar, *Commandos*-shaped cloth. But the key difference here is that rather than being based in France or Germany, the game plays out on the seldom covered (in games, at least) Eastern Front. "Almost every family in Russia lost someone in the Second World War," says Project Lead Anton Martysenko. "This page of history is not well known in the West, and we want to tell the story about the people fighting against enemy forces in dire circumstances behind the frontline."

FROM THE REAR

Partisans 1941 sees you gather together a resistance army to thwart the German advance into Russia from the rear. Each

fighter you recruit has different strengths and skills, and in addition to the main campaign, the game provides optional side missions to gather equipment and flesh out some of the soldiers' back story.

Some characters are much better suited to action rather than stealth, for example, and each character has an upgrade tree that allows you to improve specific attributes.

Then there's the role of civilians. You might spot, for example, a non-combatant being hassled by German soldiers, forcing you to choose whether to risk breaking cover to help them out or remain hidden to complete your objective.

The sheer amount of stuff in the game is simultaneously bewildering and exciting, with multiple ways to approach each objective, limited inventories to juggle and optimal pathways to consider.

OK, yes, it's basically *Commandos* again, but prettier, more complex and with more focus on ordinary soldiers and civilians. Plus, it's been 13 years since the last *Commandos* game, so it's about ruddy time we had another one.

Lewis Packwood

THE SHEER AMOUNT OF STUFF IN THE GAME IS BEWILDERING AND EXCITING

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PREVIEW

Control



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
August 2019

DEVELOPER
Remedy Interactive

PUBLISHER
505 Games

LINK
remedygames.com

CONTROL

Mysteries abound in Remedy's most ambitious game yet

As I levitate with almost complete freedom around the Brutalist atrium of the Central Research area – all clean concrete walkways broken up by formidable trees – I have a sense that this is finally the game that Remedy always wanted to make, the developer's creative promised land.

Conversations around Remedy games revolve as much around their constraints and shortcomings as their brilliance and ambition, but *Control* feels liberated, untethered from past limitations.

A big part of that is the hub-based and more systemic structure of the game. *Control* has something of the immersive sim, encouraging you to explore rooms you might otherwise miss to pick up new powers. You can watch over-saturated videos of scientists talking about dimensional fissures, and shuffle through documents that fill you in on the disaster that befell the place you're exploring.

This place is the Oldest House, the headquarters of the FBC – a government division that investigates paranormal activity. You are new boss Jesse Faden, and it's your first day on the job. The thing is, instead of being shown to your gold-plated desk and arranging a 'getting-to-know-you' conference call, you arrive to find people floating eerily in the building's vertiginous expanses – presumably dead – and black glitchy vortexes of violent energy swirling and crunching towards you.

It's a unique vision of the 'science gone wrong' trope so beloved by videogames. In a way, the tone is post-Lovecraftian, set in today's age where beliefs in gods and squid-faced deities have made way for the cold power of physics, and a sense that whatever's beyond the tenuous veil of this dimension is much less tangible and

anthropomorphic. But where the laws of cosmic physics are normally terrifying through their stark apathy to humanity, in *Control* they're something more malevolent, as I discover in my hands-on.

The corrupting force throughout the facility, known as The Hiss, manifests in all kinds of strange forms. It possesses people, for example, and sets them out to kill you. I encountered regular gunning grunts on the ground, but also more powerful levitating enemies, telekinetically hauling chairs, tables, chunks of concrete, you-name-it, at me.

FLYING DEBRIS

In a ghoulish callback to *Alan Wake*, these people ramble insane scientific nothings to themselves (at least, nothing that my non-science brain can translate). You get the sense that their minds have been stripped of the human component and left only with formulae and theories attempting to make sense of whatever dark energy has taken over the building.

The good news is that you, Jesse, have powers of your own. You can levitate high into the air to meet your flying foes, then engage in a duel of flinging whatever the hell your telekinetic pull ability can reel in towards you. Within moments, the courtyard of Central Research is strewn with debris as we entwine ourselves in a gravity-free tussle of office objects.

But there's more to Jesse than impossibly red hair and levitation. By aiming at the enemy and clicking the right analog stick, we dash through the air, slamming into them and disintegrating them into a shower of sparks.

That airdash contributes to the liberating weightlessness of controlling Jesse. You can only levitate for a limited amount of time, and can't keep going up forever, but you can airdash in any direction level with or below you, which means you can, for example, dash over to a ledge and haul yourself up, or dash into the ground to convert it into a devastating ground pound.

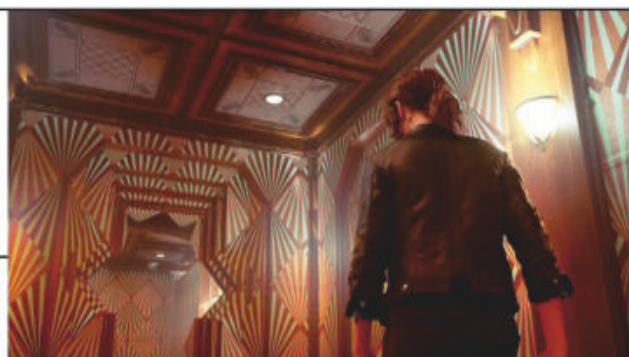
PLAYED
IT

YOU ARE NEW BOSS JESSE FADEN, AND IT'S YOUR FIRST DAY ON THE JOB

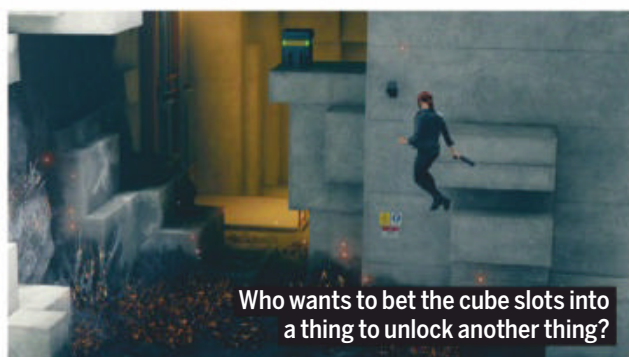


PREVIEW

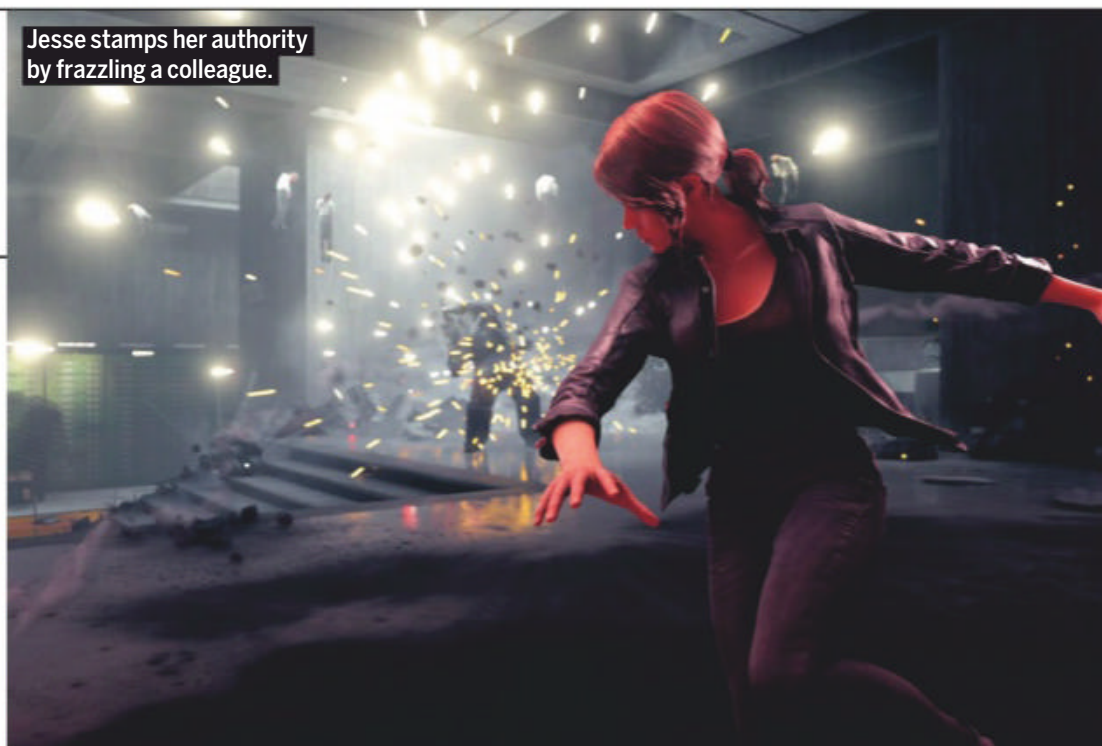
Control



Jesse stamps her authority by frazzling a colleague.



Who wants to bet the cube slots into a thing to unlock another thing?



My enduring memory of *Control* was debris.



Another trick I played with was seizing control of wounded enemies and getting them to fight for me for a limited time. I did this to the grunts, the hovering types, and the big balls of healing energy too, which would otherwise be buffing the enemy. It makes each battle a game of control, as you wrestle over physical objects to lob around and enemies to possess.

I was overpowered in the hands-on, which Thomas Puha, Remedy's communications director, assures me won't be the case in the final game; you will need to unlock abilities and increase your health to get to that point. Your health doesn't regenerate automatically either, so you need to scour the building for pickups or find creative ways (like possessing the healing orbs) to heal up.

From the hub-based world to the light puzzle elements that unlock new pathways, *Control* nods to what I think of as 'designer genres' like the *Metroidvania*, *Soulslike* and immersive sim. It's abandoning the blinkered linearity of Remedy's past efforts, and going into territory that feels like *Alan Wake* would've gone to had these ideas been more prevalent at the time.

Beyond the combat, I don't get to do all that much interacting with the world. It's more a case of exploring strange rooms, each with their own surrealistic reality-warping twists. There's a music recording studio (with no purpose for now), and a hall of mirrors, a lavishly decorated area – all crimsons and golds with an eye-teasing pattern on the walls. Suddenly, the walls in here shift and new corridors open up, which you diligently follow, taking each new turn as it manifests in front of you until you loop back to the original room, where a new pathway opens, leading to a new power to use.

Puha takes control for a mini-boss fight against an Astral Spike – that swirling mass of glitchy energy I talked about earlier. It fits into the 'shapeless black mass' category alongside unloved videogame enemies like *Prey's* Typhon or the Pus of Man in *Dark Souls 3*, but given that I'm extremely fond of both of those games, it works for me.

Instead of fighting it head-on however, Puha lures it through a large containment

door, then loops back around to the main room and shuts it inside.

These are pretty simple puzzle-based interactions, and I'd like to see them go a little deeper in the final game, but given that the demo is aimed to showcase the combat, I'm holding out hope that we'll see this area expanded on a bit more.

The Oldest House fluctuates between a particularly tasteful form of cold and corporate and impressively other. One moment I'm in a bright atrium, designed to intimidate and impress visitors, the next I'm tentatively creeping down a dark stone corridor, with angles and surfaces jutting out of places where there's really no need for angles and surfaces to exist. In 20 minutes I saw more visual variety than in entire other games.

Then the already interworldly reality of the Oldest House dissipates and a misty grey landscape of obelisks and strange stepped pyramids unravels before me. This is the Astral Plane.

Somewhere in here, Puha tells me, is an inverted black pyramid that I suspect has an awful lot to do with the mysterious events back in what approximates in this game to the real world.

TWISTING REALITY

Even though the game is just five months away, I felt like *Control* remains a mystery, and I like that. There's the story, of course, which strikes me as even more intriguing and cryptic now than it did before I played the demo. And there's even a crafting and upgrade system that I barely had the chance to touch.

There are still points that need ironing out. The combat, for all its wonderful low-gravity flow, still feels rather ethereal, with the enemies looking and feeling twiggy and unimpactful when you're duffing them up. I'm also not sure how much longevity there is in throwing bits of furniture and detritus around at enemies, so it'll be up to the upgradeable Service Weapon – your shape-shifting firearm – and whatever powers we haven't seen yet to ensure the action remains nice and varied throughout the game.

But these are all fixable. Remedy has the right ideas here, and I came away with fresh questions about what the hell is going on in this most abstract of downtown skyscrapers.

Remedy, the master of reality-bending intrigue is weaving its most intricate web yet, and I'm definitely more than happy to get caught up in it.

Robert Zak

IN 20 MINUTES I SAW MORE VISUAL VARIETY THAN IN ENTIRE OTHER GAMES

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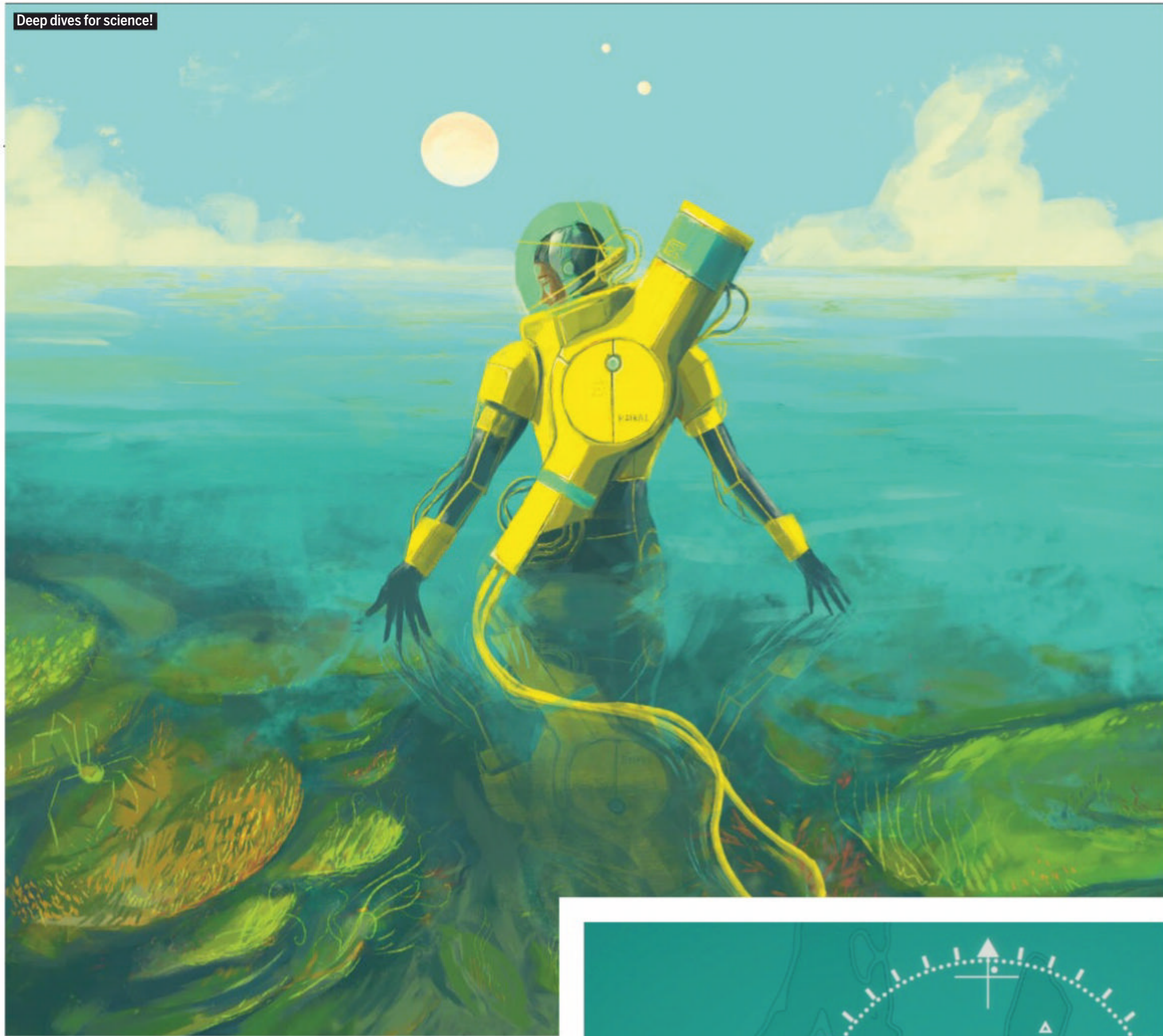


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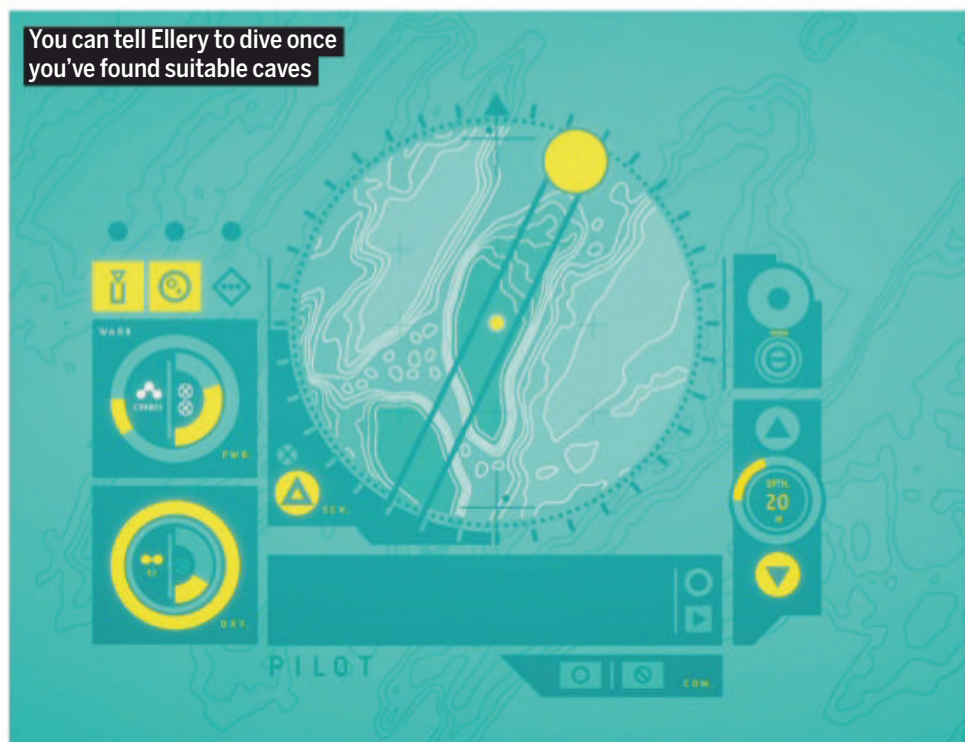
PREVIEW

In Other Waters

Deep dives for science!



You can tell Ellery to dive once you've found suitable caves





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
Spring 2020

DEVELOPER
Jump Over the Age

PUBLISHER
Fellow Traveller

LINK
www.jumpovertheage.com

IN OTHER WATERS

Under the sea new life forms are waiting for me

In *Other Waters* shrinks the entirety of an alien ocean into one interface. You're the AI that accompanies xenobiologist Ellery Vas on her dives into the oceans of Gliese 667Cc in search of life that may help sustain mankind, while trying to find out what happened to her partner, who disappeared during a prior mission.

All you see of Ellery's adventures is a map – Ellery herself is a little dot, as is everything she encounters. As you scan the environment for anything from environmental clues about the ecosystem to plants and creatures for Ellery to study, descriptive text from the interface itself as well as Ellery's observations tell you what's going on down in the depths. For developer Gareth Damian-Martin, giving players a simple interface is a way of allowing their imagination to flourish. "I don't think a game's strength lies in its fidelity. There are many games that function entirely on the strength of their descriptions coupled with some good sound effects."

One such game, which Damian-Martin cites as an inspiration for *In Other Waters*, is Adam Saltsman's *Capsule*, which takes place entirely on a radar. He also tells me of a holiday by the sea during which he started to think about designing his own creatures that you could then study. "In another life I would've been a marine biologist," he says, "So I always thought a lot about how to represent diving and elements of biological study in a game."

THE BIG BLUE

In Other Waters tickles the same urge to explore games like *No Man's Sky* and *Subnautica*, but rather than make exploration the tool by which you escape death, in the demo I mostly get lost in the wonder of discovery. Ellery's studies will in time reveal what her partner Minae Nomura might have studied before her disappearance. For now, *In Other Waters* lets me play at being a scientist just by repeat encounters with different plants. Each new scan gives Ellery an opportunity to note something new, until she can eventually take a sample. You can then have her use that sample either to power her suit, interact with the environment to solve puzzles or keep it for later, nursing and studying it at your base.

"Since all you see are dots, I want my creatures to move and interact with each other in interesting ways. They should be interesting enough for you to want to examine them further." Damian-Martin doesn't only design the creatures, but entire small-scale ecosystems. "On some level I'm trying to be accurate to biological science and evolutionary theory. All of the areas in the game have specific ecosystems. They're based on [evolutionary theorist and biologist] Lynn Margulis' idea that symbiosis is the driving factor for evolution. Everything I build follows that principle."

Since players interact with everything through the user interface, it has to be easy to understand but not too sterile. Simple commands for acknowledging Ellery via yes or no answers, a storage and some pleasantly responsive knobs to fiddle with when extracting samples or guiding your diver are all it takes to get results. The overall colour scheme represents the environment Ellery is in, but like the map, the interface stays deliberately simple.

"I don't follow strict graphic design rules for the interface because I want it to be expressive, kind of like the interfaces you see in anime from the '80s," Damian-Martin explains. "They aren't function first, but they feel more organic."

In Other Waters has taught me about the ways of scientific study, and knowing how much went into it, I look forward to discovering Gliese 667Cc even more.

Malindy Hetfeld

Often science apparently comes down to making educated guesses.

PLAYED IT

"I'M TRYING TO BE ACCURATE TO BIOLOGICAL SCIENCE AND EVOLUTIONARY THEORY"

NeoCab



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2019DEVELOPER
Chance AgencyPUBLISHER
Fellow TravellerLINK
www.neocabgame.com

NEOCAB

Explore the relationship between emotional health and employment

We meet protagonist Lina en route to her new life in Los Ojos, California. Known as Automation City, most of its workforce has been replaced by AI designed by megacorporation Capra. Lina's never been to Los Ojos, but she's planning to be the city's only human cab driver.

NeoCab may take place in a dystopian future, but the setup addresses contemporary issues. Capra could well be an analogy for the Googles and Amazons of today, omnipresent and hungry for as much of our data as possible. Soon after Lina arrives, her best friend Savy disappears, and she has to dive deep into the workings of Automation City. All the while, she has to make a living, and so you balance your search for clues with your job. You choose a passenger on your map, meet them at the designated pick-up location and then drive them where they want to go. Each night you're trying to keep your car's battery charged, hit your income quota, and maintain a four-star customer rating to avoid losing your job. Lina tries to reinforce how a human driver can offer more than just a ride from A to B.

TAXICAB CONFESSIONS

"We want to emphasise the value of interpersonal connections," creative director Patrick Ewing tells me. "Throughout the game people ride with Lina repeatedly because the automated rides aren't working for them. They want

to have more conversations." Meanwhile Lina's ability to empathise with others can take a toll on her personally. Locked in a confined space with a stranger, conversations can get awkward, and by selecting Lina's answers and monitoring her emotional well-being you constantly ride the line between a good rating and speaking up for yourself. In order to tell what Lina is feeling, you can check her Feelgrid, a wristband that communicates her emotions through colour. Once Lina is intensely angry for example, her Feelgrid will turn red, telling you it's time to do or say something that may calm her down, which becomes much harder to do once she's already angry.

"We've taken inspiration from *Papers, Please* in giving you a choice between the actions you need to take in order to be successful at your job, and the things you're prepared to make sacrifices for because they're right"

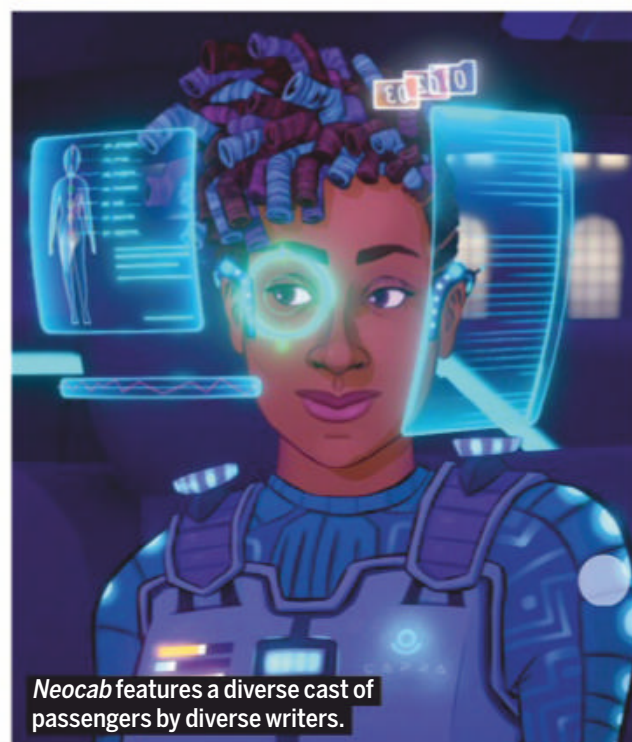
This can include small things like choosing to avoid a parking ticket that would result from meeting a passenger at their requested location, to helping a young woman get away from home even though her mother holds the NeoCab account she used to request a driver.

Chance Agency also turns a critical eye to automation, and throughout the game you will have just as many people arguing the cons of self-driving cars as the pros. "Cars are dangerous and I do believe automation will eventually decrease the mortality rate," says Ewing. "Driverless cars, the core catalyst of the events in *NeoCab*, will replace a large number of drivers within the next five to 15 years. That's going to happen in the near future, and cyberpunk is supposed to be a way to portray that extreme we could be headed towards, not a neon-lit fantasy but a cautionary tale."

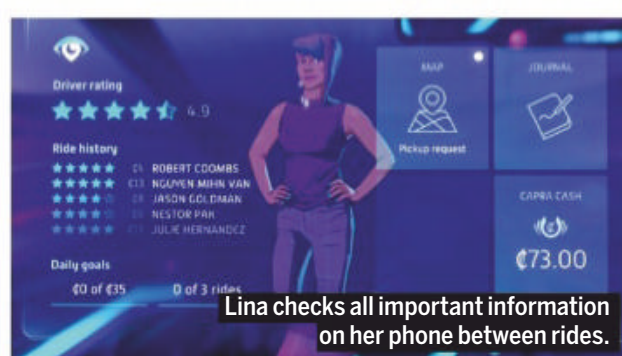
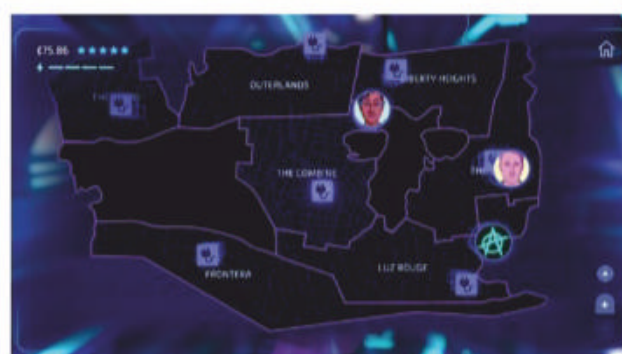
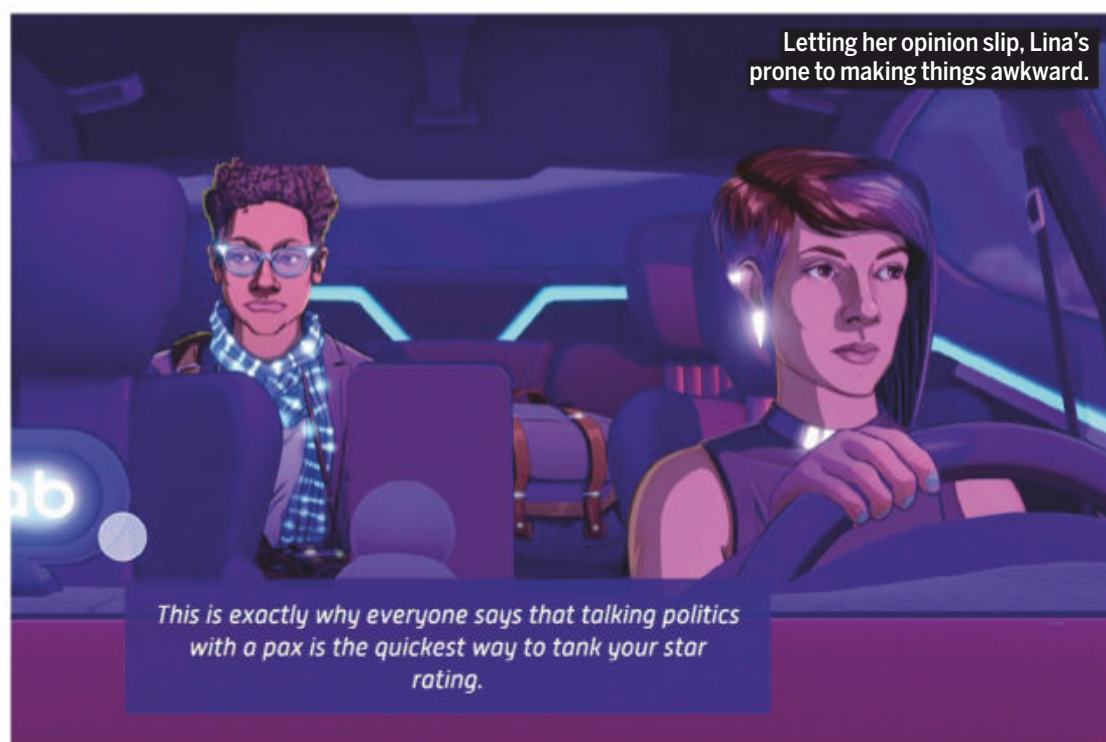
Ewing also acknowledges there's several ways to look at the gig economy. "I use these services myself and have friends who are drivers. Formal interviews and informal chats form the backbone of my research. Again, you need to acknowledge the conditions these people are working under. We want to offer hope – Lina's work may be undervalued, but she can still enjoy it, be good at it and make a difference to someone else."

Malinda Hetfeld

One night, Savy disappears – is tech giant Capra involved?



Neocab features a diverse cast of passengers by diverse writers.



A stylized comic book illustration of Claptrap, a small, blue, mechanical character with a large, expressive face and a wide, toothy grin. He is wearing a white and blue suit with a red sash and a large, ornate blue and silver mechanical arm. He is holding a large, futuristic blue and silver weapon with a glowing red light. The background is a dark, industrial setting with graffiti and a skull. The word "BEYOND" is written in large, bold, yellow letters with a black outline, partially obscuring the character.

BEYOND

BORDERLANDS 3 takes to the stars. Is this a bold new direction for the series?

By Phil Savage

I'm in LA, in a 'secret location' – it's a warehouse – to experience the grand unveiling of *Borderlands 3*. It's early in the day, and I'm still slightly jetlagged. On stage, projected onto a giant screen, Claptrap is doing a dance. His shrieks echo throughout the building. Having established that the series' mascot is back, and – depending on your perspective – as funny or as too-irritating-for-this-time-of-the-morning as usual, the demo continues. There's banter,

there's wasteland combat, and there's a miniboss. "Shiv," introduces the title card. "Brought a knife to a gun fight." *Borderlands* is back.

I'm initially underwhelmed. The early demo introduces some new movement options – sliding and mantling – but nothing that feels like a bold new direction for the series. An iterative sequel is all fine and well, but I've been fighting through *Borderlands'* wastelands for tens – maybe hundreds – of hours. Is more of the same really enough?

PANDORA



RIGHT: Bandits are as varied and wacky as ever.

MAIN: Enjoy irony? Kill Maliwan troops with their own guns.

Then, about 40 minutes into the demo, it happens. The demo skips ahead and we're introduced to Sanctuary III. It's *Borderlands 3*'s new hub – a safe zone where players can chat with NPCs, shop, pick up quests and test weapons. It's also a spaceship. From the bridge, we can see the place that has defined the series up to this point: the planet of Pandora and its moon, Elpis. And then we leave, warping out of the system and arriving somewhere new.

"I think that the desire to leave Pandora has been around for a long time," says Carl Shedd, lead lighting artist. "It's funny, it's a neat split. You have purists who are like, 'I know it was desert, but it felt like home'. I played the Game of the Year edition recently, and it felt so familiar to be back home. But the narrative and design teams wanted to experience what it would mean to be planet hopping. And the first time that I saw the warp, I had that, 'Holy shit, this is kinda cool' moment. And I've gotta be honest, when I saw Pandora out the window, it felt really nostalgic."

Sanctuary III arrives at Promethea, one of a number of planets that will be available in the full game. If Pandora was a murderous backwater, the region of Promethea shown is a murderous sci-fi city, bathed in cool purples at night, and giving way to a rich orange as the sun rises. An asteroid belt orbits the planet, causing frequent eclipses as the space rocks move past. "That was something that came from Randy [Pitchford, CEO of Gearbox]," explains Shedd. "He said, 'Man, this is infinite space. We don't have to have a sun, we don't have to have a moon. Think of crazy shit. Have some fun'."

CROSSING BORDERS

Despite the "crazy shit" mandate, Gearbox still wants *Borderlands 3* to maintain the series' style and aesthetic. "The challenge came from finding ways to introduce players to unique environments without alienating the feel of the wasteland," says Shepp. "I feel like there was a lot of trepidation from everybody in the

art team. We'd have a concept for this planet and that planet, and we'd look at those and go, 'That's really pretty but it just doesn't feel like it belongs in *Borderlands*'. So I think the challenge was trying to invent environments that felt new and felt fresh, but we all felt that yes, this is a natural place that would exist along with the humour and gameplay. I'm happy with where we've landed."

INTO NEW LANDS

After the presentation, I get to play a section of the game – starting just after the Vault Hunter arrives on Promethea. The reason for *Borderlands 3*'s planet-hopping journey is to find new Vaults – ancient locations full of advanced weapons (or, sometimes, just big prisons containing a giant tentacle monster). Racing you to their location is the Children of the Vault, a new cult headed up by Tyreen and Troy Calypso. On Promethea, they've inserted themselves into a war between weapons manufacturers Atlas – now headed by *Tales from the Borderlands*' Rhys – and Maliwan, allying with the latter. Working with Atlas, my job is to secure the city.

On stage, Pitchford describes the Calypso twins as "like the douchiest kind of live streamers of the future you can possibly imagine". I get a sense of that when they call to taunt me during a mission. "Superfan," Tyreen enthuses. "So, what do you think of our first corporate sponsors? I gotta say, so far selling out rules."

"We knew we wanted to have these twins, right from the get go," says Paul Sage, creative director. "And then, a little later on, we said, 'OK, we're going to double down on this cult idea'. But internally, we were like, 'I don't know, man, it's just still not hitting'. It wasn't until we hit on this thing where they became unlikable streamers that we were like, 'Oh, that's actually what's making this magic again'. That's what's really bringing them forward into people's minds. It's kind of that punch-in-the-face factor. They're not just evil for evil's sake. They're just people I really don't like that are horrible."

In helping Rhys, I get plenty of opportunity to tangle with Maliwan's army, as well as the bandits following the Children of the Vault. And I have to say, that slide manoeuvre that felt so underwhelming at first? It's a game changer. I've always enjoyed the *Borderlands* series because of its tone, style and ridiculous loot, but pure combat has always felt simply functional. My time with *Borderlands 3*, though, suggests that it will be a legitimately great shooter. Movement

is more fluid and dynamic, and the guns – which are more varied and absurd – feel better than ever.

"We've been trying to push the envelope as far as that's concerned in every sort of facet," says Kevin Powell, systems designer. "And so yeah, better guns, systems feel better, and we have a lot of quality of life changes with the sliding and mantling."

Beyond the pure feel of the gunplay, more work has been put into creating exciting combat arenas. "We definitely want players to interact with the environment a little more," says Powell. "And so you notice if you shot a pipe, there was some oil that came out, and if you shot an explosive barrel or had a fire elemental weapon, you can light that puddle on fire. Various elemental things can interact with things in the world in different ways, and so we really wanted to push that concept ... There's a lot of destructibility throughout the game. Of course, we have ridiculous weapons that explode everywhere so it's cool to kind of see things fly everywhere and stuff like that."

The main attraction, though, is still the guns, and the procedural generation system that ensures no two players will be wielding the same arsenal. Guns are an important part of the *Borderlands* universe, to the point that each different manufacturer, as well as being an entity within the story, also has its own design philosophy and weapon parts. "Our gun team has done an amazing job of pushing that concept of these are the guns and they do ridiculous crazy shit," says Powell. "I believe in the previous *Borderlands* there were around 300 or so weapon parts, and then in this one we have over a thousand. If you can imagine, there's a lot more variation that can happen when you generate those weapons."

"We have a fully formed weapons team this time, that includes concept guys, content art guys, game designers," explains Shapp. "And they've been incredibly efficient, they've always been ahead of everyone on schedule. So they'll show up to our review meetings and they'll always have the best stuff. It's kind of a nice shot in the arm, to be reminded what this is all about. Those guys have put in a lot of time and effort and heart into trying to really expand those manufacturer differences. They really put effort into making sure they weren't intermixing parts between manufacturers. They were like, 'This is Tediore, and this is Tediore's parts. This is Malawan, and this is Malawan parts'. I think for us, we're getting closer and closer with every evolution to where our imaginations thought we were ten years ago."

In the demo, despite earning a unique boss weapon that inflicted

"WE HAVE A FULLY FORMED WEAPONS TEAM THIS TIME"

GUN GAME

The titans of weapon design



JAKOBS

Western-inspired guns with ricocheting bullets that do critical hits.



ATLAS

Can alternate fire tracker darts that let smart bullets home in on targets.



VLADOF

Offers a high rate of fire, terrible accuracy and explosive options.



MALIWAN

Masters of elemental damage. Lets you toggle two elements.



DAHL

Built for accuracy, Dahl guns let you toggle different firing modes.



HYPERION

Is more accurate the longer you fire. Has a shield when you aim down sights.



COV

Guns cobbled together by the cultists of the Children of Vault.



TORGUE

Alternate fire modes offer sticky projectiles that stack damage.



TEDIORE

Don't reload, throw it away and watch as it sprouts legs and shoots stuff.

“WHEN YOU WANT TO PLAY WITH PEOPLE, YOU WANT TO GET IN QUICK TO THE ACTION”

➤ ridiculous acid damage, my go-to gun ends up being one of these random, procedural drops. It's a Tediore shotgun that has high range and low bullet spread, making it a beast at turning heads into a gruesome splatter of gibs. Tediore's deal is manufacturing weapons so cheap that, rather than reloading, you just throw it away and have a new one digistruct into your hands. In this case, my shotgun just exploded on impact, but there are other, stranger options. Some Tediore guns will bounce around the room. Others will sprout legs, and walk away, looking for enemies to shoot. Further augmenting the arsenal, some weapons will have secondary fire modes. In the presentation, we see one gun that shoots a tracking dart that, when it hits an enemy, causes bullets to home in on their target.

THE NEW CLASS

Introducing Borderlands 3's Vault Hunters



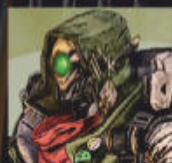
MOZE

Class: Gunner
Can digistruct a mech around herself. Other players can use the mounted gun on its head.



AMARA

Class: Siren
Summons ethereal fists that can slam, blast and grab enemies, inflicting elemental damage.



FL4K

Class: Beastmaster
Pets! FL4K can command skags, spiderants and other beasts found in the *Borderlands* universe.



ZANE

Class: Operative
AKA, the one with the drone. As an Operative, Zane can equip two abilities at the same time.

The 'loot shooter' has become a more competitive genre since the release of *Borderlands 2*, with *Destiny 2*, *The Division 2* and *Anthem* all currently vying for players' attention. Gearbox, however, isn't tempted by the games-as-a-service trend. Nonetheless, co-op remains an important focus for the sequel. "I come from an MMO background," says Sage, "and so one of the things that I've learned over time is, when you want to play with people, you want to get in quick to the action. I think that is one of the beautiful things about *Borderlands 2* and *Borderlands 3*, the ability to just match and say, 'Hey, I want to go fight bosses, or I want to go have this game plan activity' ... You're just in there having a good time."

To this end, *Borderlands 3* will introduce some infrastructural tweaks to make getting together with friends that much easier. Now, when players group together, the enemies they fight and the gear they collect will be appropriately scaled for each teammate. Gearbox demonstrated the system during the presentation, as a second, higher level player joined the fight. A low level enemy for the first

RIGHT: Promethea is experiencing a hostile corporate takeover.

MAIN: Zane is one of the four Vault Hunters. And Irish.

player appeared as a higher level one for their partner. And when the fight is over, Gearbox protects players from teammates with poor impulse control with a new feature that will instance loot to each player, meaning there's no longer a need to squabble over who needs that legendary drop.

In fact, many of the new or tweaked conveniences seem specifically designed to keep groups moving at pace. A new station on Sanctuary III, for instance, will collect up any guns you don't pick up during play – presumably meaning groups won't need to spend a long period of downtime painstakingly sorting through a boss's drops. Even character skills have been adjusted

to fit this mentality. Each Vault Hunter still has three skill trees to pick from, but now each tree features its own active ability that you can swap in and out. Amara, for instance, has a ground pound called Phaseslam, a projectile attack called Phaseblast, and Phasegrap, which holds an enemy in place (similar to Maya's Phaselock in *Borderlands 2*). Zane, meanwhile, has an automated drone, a clone that he can swap places with, and a barrier that stops incoming attacks.

What this means is that each character has the potential to fill multiple roles and playstyles, ensuring that even two players who are using the same character can team up and fill a meaningfully different niche.

BIGGER AND BETTER

The one main question I had during the event was this: to what extent do these different planets change the way a *Borderlands* game plays? Based on my time on Promethea, the answer is not very much at all. "Same *Borderlands* formula, but not on Pandora only," as Powell succinctly explains. But my time playing *Borderlands 3* only served to reaffirm what I already enjoyed about the series, and had me impressed by the clever tweaks and additions implemented along the way – from better combat and a co-op friendly infrastructure, to, yes, sliding and mantling.

Gearbox doesn't need to ape the live service loot shooters that have emerged in the seven years since *Borderlands 2*'s release. Rather, they can cherry pick some of their main quality of life innovations, and feed them back into a series that already has its own personality and following. *Borderlands 3* will be bigger. It has the potential to be much better. And it's in space. Beyond that, I think more of the same really will be enough. ■



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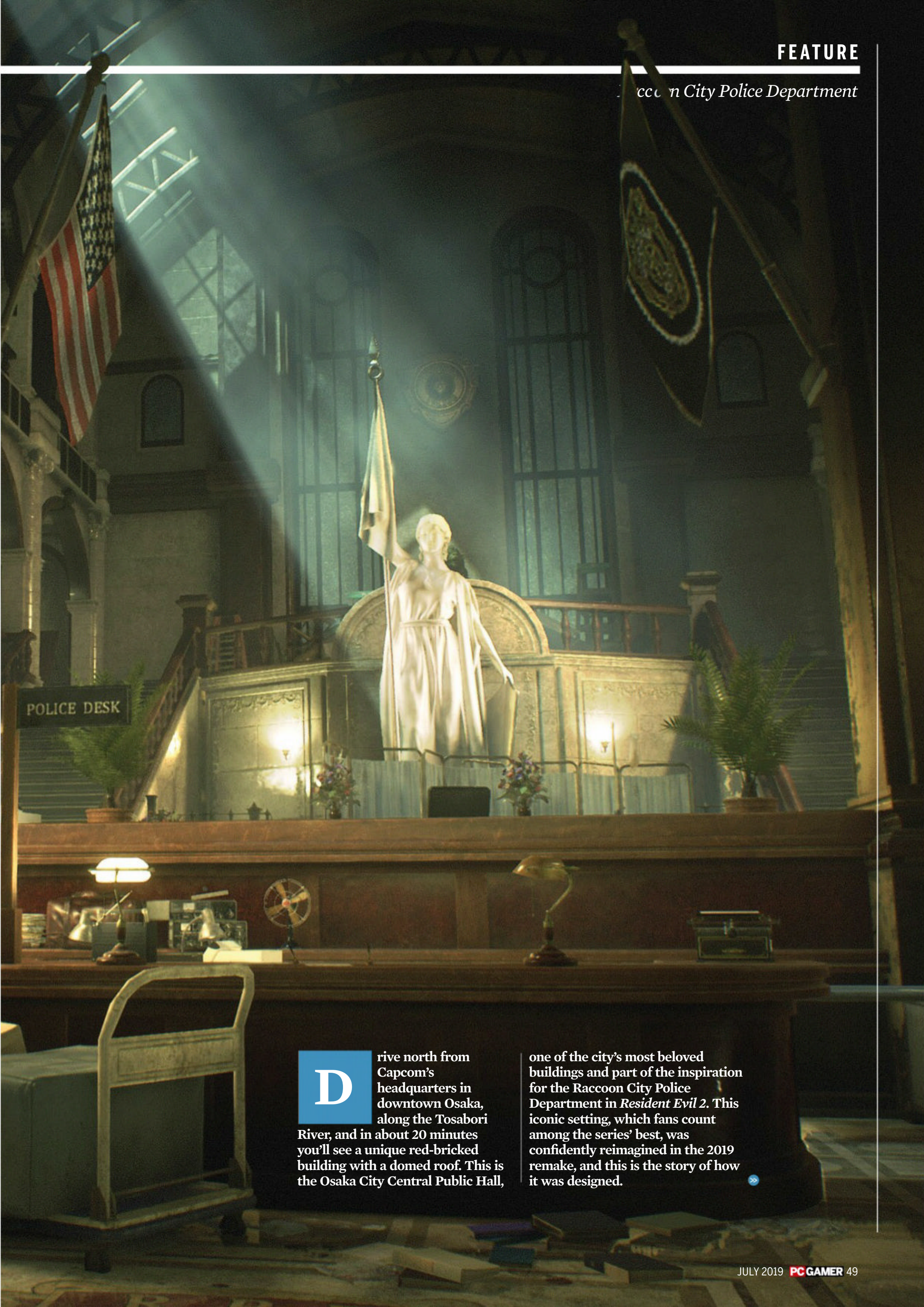
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How Capcom reimagined the iconic
RACCOON CITY POLICE DEPARTMENT.

LAW AND
DISORDER

By Andy Kelly



Drive north from Capcom's headquarters in downtown Osaka, along the Tosabori River, and in about 20 minutes you'll see a unique red-bricked building with a domed roof. This is the Osaka City Central Public Hall,

one of the city's most beloved buildings and part of the inspiration for the Raccoon City Police Department in *Resident Evil 2*. This iconic setting, which fans count among the series' best, was confidently reimaged in the 2019 remake, and this is the story of how it was designed. »

Raccoon City Police Department



FAR LEFT: The flames from the helicopter block off part of the station.

LEFT: The light of the vending machine makes for an atmospheric scene.

RIGHT: Statues are a remnant from the station's previous life as a museum.

Enter the Central Public Hall, which was built in 1918 and is an important cultural centre for the city, and you'll find polished floors, towering pillars, ornate detailing, and a vast church-like ceiling – the same kind of grand architecture Leon and Claire see when they escape the zombie-ravaged streets of Raccoon City and enter the RPD's impressive main hall. All that's missing are the blood splatters and groans of distant zombies.

Capcom's long-awaited *Resident Evil 2* remake is a masterclass in updating an old game for a new audience. It retains the spirit of the PlayStation original, released in 1998, but uses modern technology to make it feel genuinely new and exciting. An important part of the remake's success is the newly realised RPD building – a setting that's just recognisable enough to feel like the same place, but much more evocative and atmospheric.

"Our goal was retaining the feel of the original building, but also to increase the sense of scale and realism," says *Resident Evil 2* remake director Kazunori Kadoi. "I was confident players would respond well to this, and I didn't feel any particular pressure to live up to the original game."

Although the original main hall was a flat pre-rendered image, and the new one is fully rendered in 3D, they both create the same feeling of dread and mystery – that this might not be the safe haven the characters were expecting after all.

Kadoi explains that the architecture of the station, both in the original and the remake, was inspired by the Gothic revival style. Popularised in the west in the 1700s, this architectural movement was an attempt to revive medieval Gothic architecture – particularly in religious buildings. And there's a definite cathedral-like feel to the RPD main hall, which could easily double as a place of worship if you inserted a few rows of pews.

CULTURE SHOCK

There's also an uncanny quality to the station that I think comes from Raccoon City, an American city, being viewed through a Japanese lens. If the station had been designed by a western studio – one that is perhaps more familiar with the kind of bland

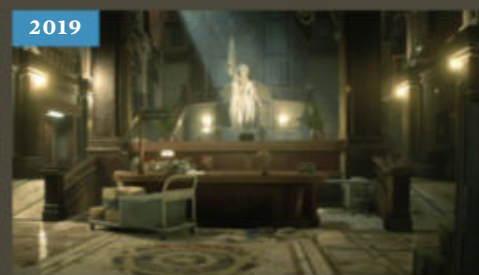
government building police departments usually operate out of – it might not have been quite so idiosyncratic and memorable. I mean, how many police stations do you know with a giant marble statue of a goddess behind the reception desk?

This statue is something Kadoi felt was important to bring back, as well as the eerie stuffed animals found in the office of the corrupt Chief Irons. The statue is noticeably bigger in the remake, dramatically lit by moonlight streaming through glass windows in the ceiling. "I wanted to carry the statue and the taxidermy animals over to the new police station," he says. "But at the same time I wanted to make changes that would make the gameplay more fun, and make the station feel more like a believable space."

BEFORE AND AFTER *How the RPD main hall has evolved*



1998



2019



1998



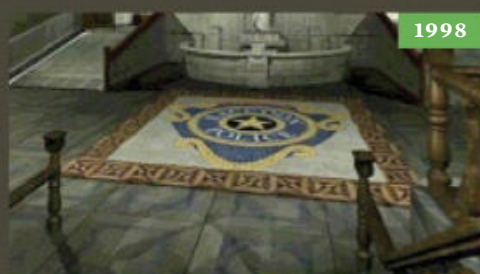
2019



1998



2019



1998



2019



**“I WANTED TO MAKE
CHANGES THAT
WOULD MAKE THE
GAMEPLAY
MORE FUN”**



**“THE RPD MAIN HALL HAS
SOME WEIRD GIMMICKS,
LIKE HIDDEN PASSAGES”**



FAR LEFT: Leon's flashlight illuminates a grisly scene.

LEFT: The typewriter is a staple of the *Resident Evil* series.

ABOVE: Marvin is one of the few humans in the station who hasn't turned... yet.

Raccoon City Police Department

» Kadoi explains that, because of advances in graphics technology and player expectation, videogame settings have to be more believable today. When I first played *Resident Evil 2* as a teenager, I never questioned the fact that the RPD was headquartered in an elaborate old building filled with arcane puzzles. But these days, Kadoi says, people question this stuff more, which led to additional backstory being written for the station.

“The building in the centre of town wasn’t always a police station,” reads a tourism pamphlet you can pick up in a waiting room. “In fact, it used to be an art museum. Various features like the unusual clock tower and the goddess statue in the main hall remind us of a bygone era.” This idea is also reinforced by the oil paintings, old statues, and other artefacts you find littered around the station – often in storage rooms with dust sheets draped over them. Wherever you look there are clues to the building’s past.

“The RPD main hall has some weird gimmicks, like hidden passages that wouldn’t be conceivable in a normal police station,” says Kadoi. “So I think positioning them as part of a more attraction-oriented space such as a museum or gallery makes that more convincing and believable within the game world.” Of course, a lock-and-key system based around playing card suits is still weird, even for an old building like this, but it’s a little less distracting thanks to this added touch of world-building.

Another important design element for the new station was, despite the shift to an over-the-shoulder camera, keeping the same feeling of suspense created by the original’s fixed camera angles. “Creating a sense of space you can’t see into was part of the fixed camera angle system in the original game,” says Kadoi. “But in the remake we used blind corners and darkness to set up a similar feeling, as well as directional audio to give you a sense that there is something out there, but you can’t see where it is yet.”

LIGHT SOURCE

One of the most dramatic differences between the 1998 and 2019 police stations is the use of lighting. For the most part, the original station is brightly lit. But in the remake, many of its corridors and rooms have been plunged into darkness, forcing you to use a flashlight. This makes it a much

scarier place to explore, particularly when you’re turning one of those blind corners in the dark. For this aspect of the station’s design, Kadoi tells me that the two key words for the artists were “darkness” and “wetness”.

“We wanted to create that feeling of something glistening in the dark,” he says. “This gives players a sense of a hidden presence waiting for them out of sight.” This curious visual philosophy is felt all over the station, whether it’s a corridor partly flooded by a leaking water pipe, or the gruesome glistening effect when your flashlight catches a pool of crimson-coloured congealed blood. These effects are also a showcase for the impressively natural lighting effects that Capcom’s in-house RE Engine is capable of.

Playing the game, there is a sense that the building has been designed with a survival horror videogame firmly in mind. There are more blind corners and narrow, winding corridors than would make sense in a real building. But it doesn’t dampen the authenticity of the setting, thanks to the fidelity of the visuals and the cinematic use of light and shadow.

A less obvious, but still important, design element was evoking the game’s late 1990s setting. Overall it’s quite subtle with its references to the time period, even taming

Leon’s ‘curtains’ hairstyle, making him look less like a member of a boy band. But there are a few clues scattered around that remind you of when the action takes place. “The most obvious example is the computers,” says Kadoi. “They are the kind of bulky beige monitors that were common at the time. There are some other small period-accurate props scattered throughout the station that tie into the setting too.”

FAN FAVOURITE

There are a lot of reasons why the RPD building is a great setting. The way it’s built around a central hub, which helps you build a mental map as you play. The gorgeous architecture and moody, atmospheric lighting. The nostalgia hit you get if you played the original. The tension-breaking moments of calm, suddenly interrupted by an unexpected zombie tumbling through a window. The way it subverts your expectations, such as when zombies appear in the main hall, your precious safe haven, in the B scenario. And, of course, the looming presence of the Tyrant.

I ask Kadoi why he thinks the police station is such a beloved setting among *Resident Evil* fans – and what makes it unique. “Police stations are places we see a lot in movies and TV, so they feel real to us,” he says. “But they weren’t used as often in games at the time *Resident Evil 2* was released, which made it quite a novelty. But mainly I think it’s the idea that police officers, whose job it is to protect citizens, have transformed into zombies. There’s something very impactful and ironic about that.” ■

DEAD SET

Other Resi locations I’d love to see remakes of



RACCOON CITY

The success of the *Resi 2* remake means a new version of the third game could be in the works. I hope so, because I’d love to see more of the zombie-infested Raccoon City in three dimensions.



ROCKFORT ISLAND

I’ve always loved the setting of *Code Veronica*: a remote prison island flooded with zombies. You’re landlocked in most *Resi* games, but the island setting here adds to the claustrophobia.



SPENCER MANSION

Yes, Capcom’s remake of the original *Resident Evil* is fantastic – but it still uses 2D pre-rendered backgrounds. I’d love to explore the creepy mansion from the first game in full 3D, powered by the RE Engine.



MARGINAL

Does better gear really make you a better player?

By Phil Iwaniuk

GAINS



Whenever there's technology involved in a feat of skill, we're bound to wonder. If you slid into Lewis Hamilton's Mercedes F1 car, would you win races? And if you sat under the bright arena lights in the gaming chair of an esports pro, using their exact framerate, refresh rate, mouse settings, and precise mousepad friction levels, would you suddenly become Simple?

The tacit implication from gaming hardware and peripheral manufacturers is that you just might. We've been sold everything from gaming mice to sound cards on the basis of gaining an advantage over the competition for decades, and that's only been amplified by esports' mainstream ascendancy. In 2019 it's de rigueur to fill your desk with RGB-emitting kit that all promises to up your game, but those promises often go unchecked.

There's no doubt that at the elite level, tiny variables matter. The difference between 60Hz and 144Hz might very well be the difference between being carried around on your cheering allies' shoulders, and having them enter your bedroom carrying bars of soap in pillowcases.

But for a journeyman multiplayer gamer who's happy just to break even on his K:D (hi there), is there any sense in it?

Weary of my own shortcomings in online shooters, I decide to undertake a deeply scientific experiment. An A/B test for the ages, an Erin Brockovic moment in PC hardware, a... okay – fine. I sit and play games using different kit and then record my stats.

THE TEST RIGS

First I need to establish the variables, and frame rate is the logical start point. As any pro gamer will tell you, more frames is always better. With this in mind, it feels only right that my esports-level rig should harness the RTX 2080 Ti's heft. For the B setup, a GTX 1070 with a frame cap at 60fps using Nvidia Inspector will do the job.

Next up is the monitor. The usual criteria go out of the window here – resolution and colour

reproduction aren't that important to performance. What matters is refresh rate and response time. A panel with a refresh rate of

120Hz or above lets you v-sync at frame rates beyond 60, basically showing more information to your eyes. How much of that information they can actually process is up for debate, but again you'll see pro gamers advocating higher refresh rates in interviews. As for response time, measured in milliseconds, it's a measure of how quickly the individual pixels can change colour and thus keep up with the rapidly refreshing image. In my A/B test, a 120Hz panel with a purported 3ms response time is hooked up to my pro gaming setup, while a perfectly respectable 60Hz IPS model with 10ms response time is hooked up to the B rig.

YOU'LL SEE PRO GAMERS ADVOCATING HIGHER REFRESH RATES IN INTERVIEWS

Next up it's audio, and for the pro gaming rig I'm using the Steelseries Arctis Pro Wireless with virtual surround sound turned on. For the B rig, I dig out a real museum piece – some Creative speakers from the early '00s. Deeply average audio.

A mechanical keyboard and a gaming mouse with a crazy sensor are no-brainers for a pro-gaming rig, so I've opted for a Logitech G Pro keyboard and G703 Lightspeed mouse. Since most pro gamer wiki pages feature pretty detailed breakdowns of their mouse settings, I'm copying the settings of one

of my favourite players: Simple in CS:GO, Break in PUBG, and cYpheR in Quake Champions. For the B rig, my trusty old Packard Bell membrane keyboard circa

1998 comes out to play, resplendent in sweat-tinged beige, along with an Intellimouse that's older than most pro players. Finally, I'm slapping the visual settings down in all the above games to maximise visibility and performance.



RIGHT: The pro kit is comfortable, but when it comes to performance, the jury's out.





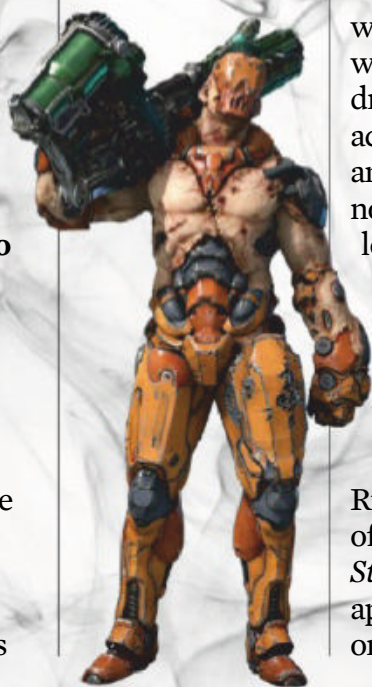
ABOVE: Would you have heard them coming if your headphones were *slightly* better?

RIGHT: Headshots are hard to come by at the best of times.

THE GAMES

Game time. I begin with *CS:GO*, playing five rounds on my pro-gaming setup and then another five on my humble B rig. I'm playing deathmatch on *de_dust2* each time just to eliminate any variables. In the pro rig, that 120Hz panel does have a visible effect. It really looks and feels smoother to play.

For my part, I spend five rounds being absolutely demolished by Russians who I can only assume are using voice chat to offer me gentle pointers and words of encouragement in case my morale dips. Using Simple's mouse settings



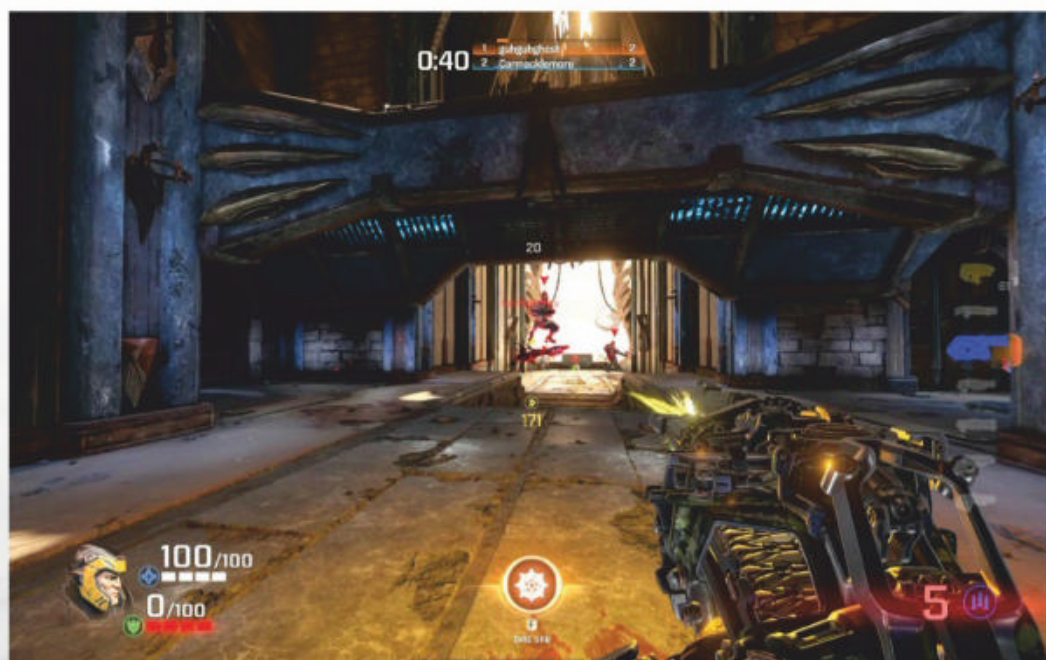
with the G703, I feel like a fish out of water. I find I need to make huge, dramatic strokes back and forth across the mouse mat to look around and that high refresh rate's doing nothing to compensate for my lolloping mouse motions.

The surround sound's offering no real advantage, either. On a slower-paced server I might have the opportunity to pick out footsteps or the sound of weapons being cycled beneath the constant Russian commentary and the drone of AKs doing battle. Even *Counter-Strike*, the pioneer of considered approach and tactical forethought in online shooters, is pretty rowdy a lot

of the time. I finish five matches having struggled to maintain even a K:D of 1:2 most of the time. Furious, and finding no recompense in my keyboard's gentle blue RGB lighting, I switch to the B rig.

With membrane key sensors and a mouse as old as time beneath my hands, I play another five deathmatch games in *de_dust2*. The results are, surprisingly, about the same. A K:D lingering around 1:2, and a feeling of discomfort and unfamiliarity with my mouse's behaviour.

I begin to suspect that rather than *the best* gear improving performance, the gear I'm most familiar with might produce the best results.



LEFT: *Quake* puts mouse polling rates and key press recognition under the microscope.

Never mind – onto *PUBG*. I notice two things about the pro setup straight away: firstly that Break uses mercifully similar mouse settings to mine, and secondly that the game's so much more readable at minimum graphics settings and ultra draw distance. I feel genuinely more confident in my marksmanship at 120Hz, and that's reflected

I FEEL GENUINELY MORE CONFIDENT IN MY MARKSMANSHIP AT 120HZ

by what I'd deem to be four decent rounds. And one total bust, but you get those with battle royale games, don't you.

Moving onto the B rig for five more games (landing every time at Prison to minimise variables again) what hits me the most is sound. I didn't feel like I was benefitting from the virtual surround in *CS:GO*, but here in *Erangel*

I feel lost with only some tinny speakers to tip me off when an enemy draws near.

Perhaps it's psychological, but combat feels much harder at 60fps too. Interesting.

Finally, *Quake Champions*. The fastest, most unforgiving online shooter out there. The Big Kahuna. I enter cYpheR's mouse settings, whack the graphics down, and let rip on five unranked team deathmatches. I'm slaughtered. Once again, the pro mouse setting is very different to my usual feel, far less sensitive and requiring great swathes of movement across the mouse mat. The audio sounds great and everything, but it's not stopping me haemorrhaging points. Once again though, I'm struck by how much more readable the game is with lighting effects dialled right down, and how noticeably smooth it feels at 120Hz.

Of the three games, *Quake Champions* feels the most unwieldy on my B rig. Perhaps it's the sheer number of inputs per second, but my ancient mouse and keyboard just can't keep up.

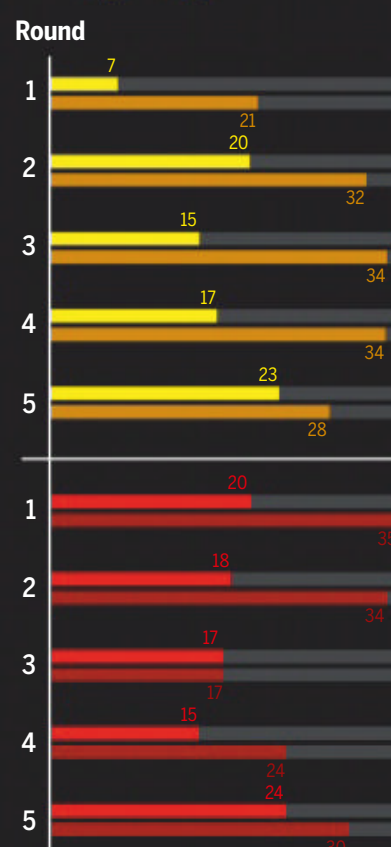
I feel a step behind the duration of my five matches. For the first time in this experiment – perhaps ever – I actually miss the precision of mechanical keyboard switches.

THE FINDINGS

With the data gathered, what's now clear is that even more important than having 'pro' gear and settings is being familiar with your own. My personal performances were *slightly* better across the board, but well down on my usual performances with kit I use every day, and with settings I've honed to my personal taste. This in itself doesn't pull the rug out from under the peripherals market – the comfort and aesthetics of a good keyboard, mouse and headset are vastly more important than their bearing on your performance. But it does mean that if you're attributing the fact you haven't made it to the pro leagues yet on your setup, you've got some tough questions to ask yourself.

CS: GO – DUST 2 DEATHMATCH

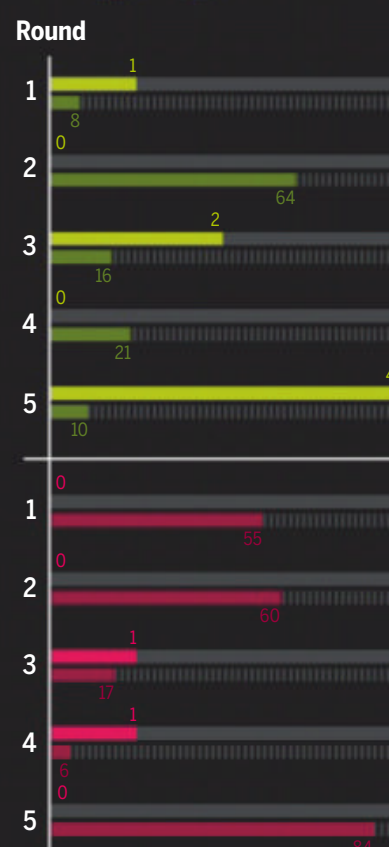
RIG A - Kills Deaths



RIG B - Kills Deaths

PUBG – EURANGEL

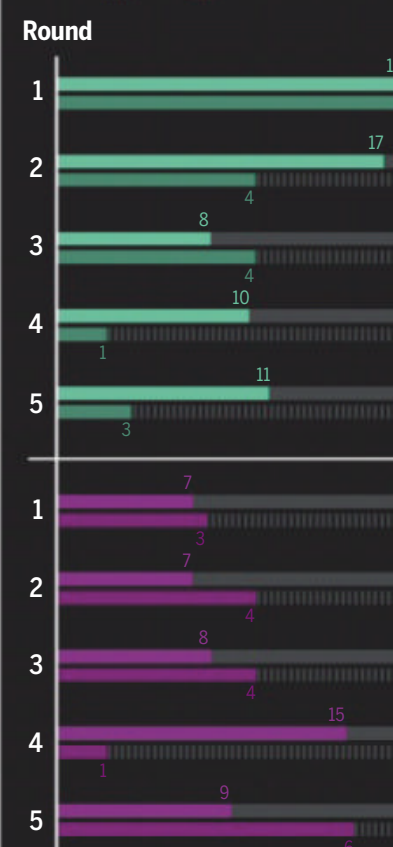
RIG A - Kills Position



RIG B - Kills Position

QUAKE – UNRANKED TDM CHAMPIONS

RIG A - Kills Assists



RIG B - Kills Assists

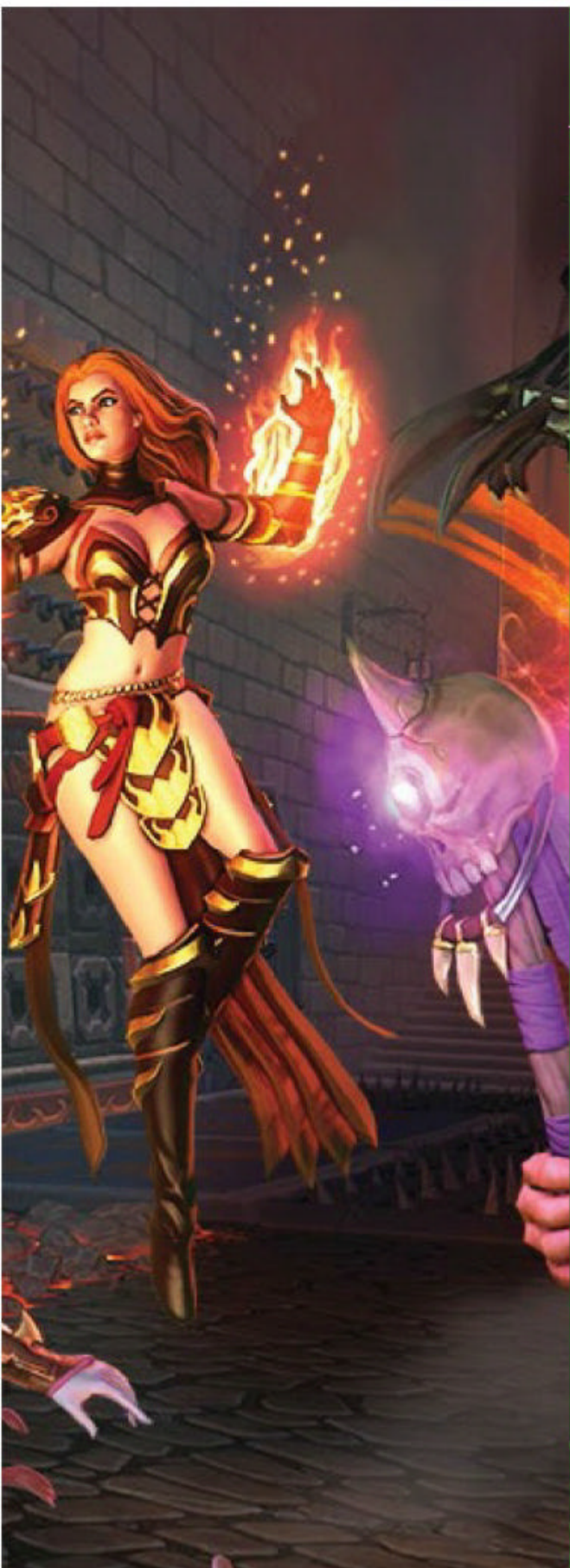
Orcs Must Die!

THE GREEN MILE

The mission to finish **ORCS MUST DIE!**
UNCHAINED before shutdown.

By Jeremy Peel

Orcs Must Die!



LEFT: *Unchained* had tons of playable heroes left over from its MOBA days.

BOTTOM: Arrow walls and floor spikes are the old reliables of the trap roster.



Orcs Must Die! Unchained is dead. On 8 April, Robot Entertainment shut down the servers it once hoped could be a

home to millions. This had been the studio's intended opus, the action tower defence hit reimagined as a free-to-play hobby game. It had the backing of Chinese internet giants Tencent, just like *League of Legends* and *Fortnite*. But in the end, it didn't even have enough players to cover its server fees.

It's a genuine tragedy, a cautionary tale about what happens when live games don't get the air they need, but it's not the one I'm telling today. Instead, this is the story of *Orcs Must Die! Unchained*'s last weekend, and a doomed mission to play the whole damn thing.

As we begin, it's Saturday afternoon. The lights won't go out until 4pm on Monday. Robot announced the closure three months ago, and I'd resolved to play through the entire game in co-op with a friend before that happened. But, to misquote Dr Ian Malcolm, life, uh, gets in the way. Two job changes and one relocation later, here we are, with just a couple of days and 36 maps yet to master.

50 HOURS TIL SHUTDOWN

Every *Orcs Must Die!* level is bordered by entrance points, which the orcs pour through, and centred

around a portal, which must be guarded at all costs. The routes from those gateways to that rift are your canvas – corridors in which to create elaborate killboxes made up of floor spikes, arrow walls, pounders, grinders, and swinging maces. Who said orcs couldn't be tender?

For *Orcs Must Die!* enthusiasts, it's customary to 'five star' a map before moving onto the next – achieving the highest possible rating by not letting a single orc pass into that portal, no matter how fast or how big they are.

We're planning to hold ourselves to that standard – but since we're about to face a rapid increase in difficulty, we'll accept help to get us there. Thankfully, Robot abolished its currency system in January, making us de facto millionaires for the duration of the game's life. An XP-boosting battle pass? Yes please. Chests filled with trap upgrades and stat-boosting traits? I'll take 60. We're troughing at the buffet table of the Titanic while the ship sinks.

As we trigger the first wave of the weekend, a familiar, ragged roar goes up. The orcs are coming. We'll be hearing that sound many more times in the coming days.

47 HOURS TIL SHUTDOWN

I take a break to walk the dogs. At the park, the right-angled pathways activate the killbox-planning centres of my brain. That narrow gate would be the perfect bottleneck at which to head off an incoming horde, and ripe for tar pits too. Council planning permission pending.





The orcs never did learn to jump, to the relief of barricade builders everywhere.

45 HOURS TIL SHUTDOWN

The five star standard isn't going to work. Here's the thing: beating an *Orcs Must Die!* map is a challenge, but it's also an art, and there's a degree to which it cannot be rushed.

Every run is broken up into planning and horde phases, granting you moments of pause to plant your traps, before you dive in to plug the holes by hacking at the orcs yourself. You experiment, and then you test. Perhaps a flip trap proves too powerful, sending an enemy straight over a lava pool and into another, undefended lane. So you tweak the setup and run the test again. You can theory-craft all you like, but you can't know what'll work until green feet are pounding across the stone.

That fifth, elusive star asks you to do all this and meet a par time, which often requires ripping up established trap routes to find a way of clearing the hordes quicker. At best, we're managing to five star one map an hour and, accounting for sleep, that's just not going to cut it. We have to lower our standards.

43 HOURS TIL SHUTDOWN

At this new pace of imperfection, one map blends into the next. There's a great library, filled with winding staircases and stacks so tall you could only access the uppermost books with ladders. We fix flame launchers to the shelves and blast the orcs as they're funnelled between the aisles. A little later we're baffled by Shark Island, a harbour where the orcs wear cocked hats like pirates, and the usual corridors are eschewed for a

TRAPPED OUT

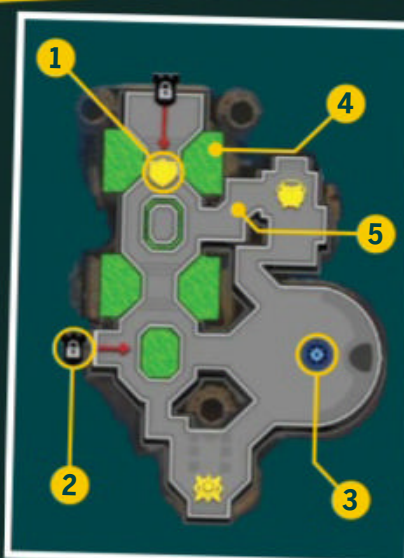
What to consider when laying a path of pain

1 ALLIES

A sword-swinging guardian can be summoned here and surrounded with tar pits – all the better to slow down enemies for the chop.

2 TIMING

The first waves will emerge at the top of the map, but if I don't plan ahead, I'll be swamped once the west gate opens.



3 OBJECTIVE

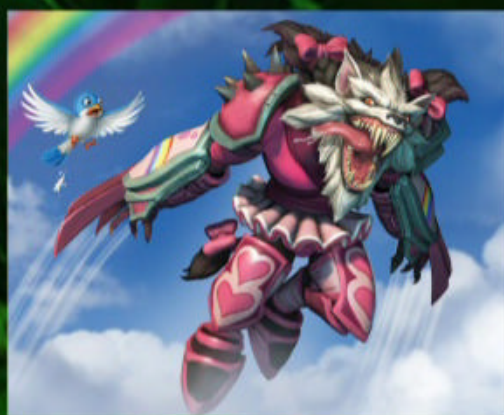
This is the rift, and the rift is everything. Hundreds of orcs will try and make their way here, and only 25 need to succeed.

4 PHYSICS

Orcs can't swim, especially not in whatever this green goo is. Flipper traps will help me push them into the deep end.

5 REDIRECTION

Blocking this corridor with barricades will be expensive, but allows me to funnel every orc on the map through the same killbox.



LEFT: Skins pushed *Unchained* away from its Tolkien-esque aesthetic.



BOTTOM: I'm a lumberjack and I'm au fait with axe combat.

lattice of walkways that we utterly fail to navigate. At one point I witness my friend, as the wolfman hero Blackpaw, pounce straight over a jetty and into the sea beyond, drowning instantly. A pool of blood spreads from the spot he hits the water.

These levels are filled with ghosts. Occasionally we come across cul-de-sacs pulled from *Siege*, the abandoned MOBA-like mode Robot initially pinned its hopes on. Some levels copy and paste segments from others, while others are bespoke and built for one-off spectacle. In Orcatraz, our allied guardians are gaolers and the orcs break down doors under the gaze of Shawshank-style spotlights.

These are the collective results of a changing development philosophy over *Unchained*'s five years as a live game – the signs of a studio caught between trying to do



something different and recreating a beloved formula.

37 HOURS TIL SHUTDOWN

Sleep, and dreams. At some stage a pool of blood spreads in my nightmares, just like Blackpaw's.

29 HOURS TIL SHUTDOWN

It's not just par times we've given up on now, but our zero tolerance policy for orcs in the portal. It doesn't feel good. This arbitrary goal has stripped away the pride we've always taken in our orc-stopping architecture.

Ordinarily in this game, you can confidently stride onto a bridge, declare "You shall not pass" and mean it – knowing that you've got infinite tries to get it right. But now, finally, we're running out of goes.

24 HOURS TIL SHUTDOWN

It can't be done. At least, not by us. In earlier *Orcs Must Die!* games, the strength of your heroes was fixed, and increased power came from new traps and their combos. But in *Unchained*, everything levels up. Heroes gain XP, which boosts their damage output and defence.

When we were five-starring levels, the difficulty curve had felt gentle – but now we're settling for less, it's leaving us breathless and frustrated. It doesn't matter that we're coating orcs with fuel before they walk into the brimstone pits. Nor that I'm firing the blunderbuss of Brass, my dwarven engineer, right between the eyes of my enemies. Despite our best efforts, weakened orcs are still getting through, and it's

because we're now five or six tiers below the recommended level.

It's a problem indicative of the change online games have undergone in the last five years. *Unchained* bears all the obvious hallmarks of a hobby game: coffee shop-style rewards for coming back, daily and weekly objectives for killing particular bosses, target quotas for orc-killing. It's designed to occupy a consistent spot in our lives for months, if not years – certainly not to be rattled

alive as they saunter onto the map. Then, barricades allow us to consolidate three lanes into one, where Brass' turret and mines deal with the remaining stragglers.

Orcs Must Die! at its best is a creative act – nobody else will have solved this problem in quite the same way, nor built exactly what we have. Then it's all wiped away, like a chalk drawing on a pavement in the rain, and we start it all over again, determined to do it better.

DESPITE OUR BEST EFFORTS, WEAKENED ORCS ARE STILL GETTING THROUGH

through in the space of a weekend. By attempting this mission, we're working against the fundamental cadence of the game.

18 HOURS TIL SHUTDOWN

The best tribute we can pay to *Orcs Must Die! Unchained* in its final hours, we decide, is to play it the way we always have. On Sunday night we have more fun than we've had all weekend, cherry-picking the maps we've blazed past but think we can perfect. The library level turns out to be a fascinating challenge – to meet par time we have to unscrew the traps from the shelves and glue them to the floors instead, burning the orcs

15 MINUTES PAST SHUTDOWN

It's Monday, and my friend has gone back to work, but I've decided this is my job now. The servers are officially closed, and only a handful of players remain in global chat. "Is this heaven now?", one asks. "Are we dead?"

Another tries opening the client on a second PC – no dice. We know that when we log out, we won't be able to get back in. "I'm gonna stay on until they pull the plug," someone says. "One last trip down gib lane?" I join him for a final run. It feels much the same as any other. Except this time, when the traps are wiped away, the game goes with them. ■



TOP: Flip traps are a favourite for amateur physicists.

RIGHT: Brass was a highlight of the last expansion.

PC Specialist recommends Windows



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REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

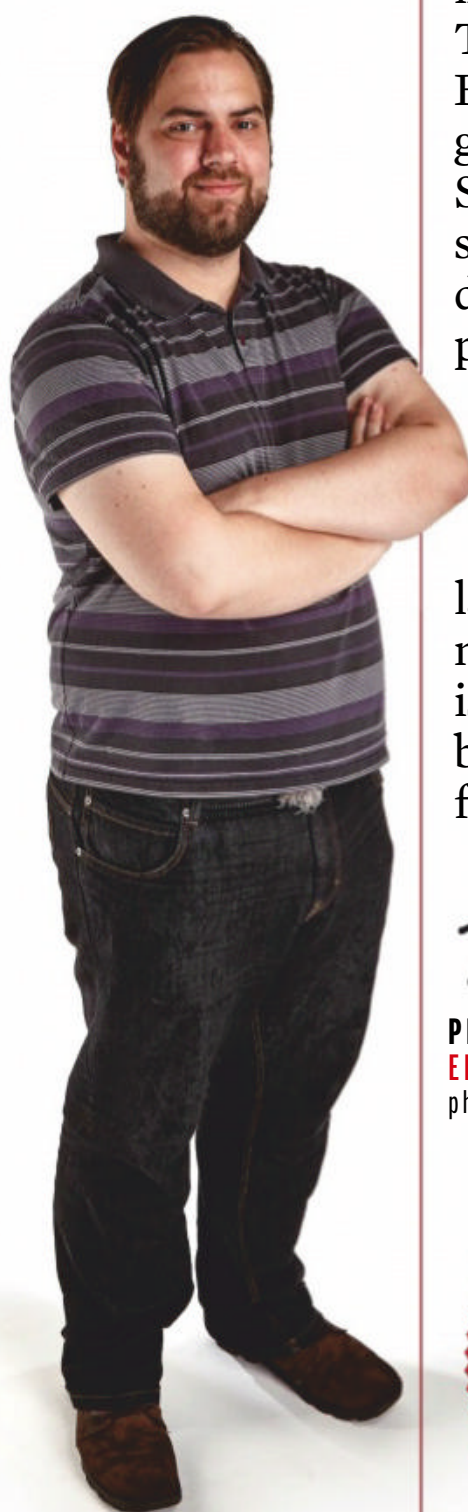
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgameviews



Choose your own

If I was hip to the current cultural zeitgeist, I could spin an insightful introduction from something relevant like *Game of Thrones* or *Avengers: Endgame*. Unfortunately, I've seen neither. I *do* have some inflammatory opinions about Mr. Tonegawa: Middle Management Blues – a spin-off of legendary gambling anime *Kaiji: Ultimate Survivor* – and how the modern setting undermines the period drama of the original series. But it's probably too niche to be relevant.

How about this: what I love about the current era of PC gaming is how easy it is to find your niche.

Maybe you want to dissect the latest big release, and argue over its merits and failures. But just as valid is walking the quieter path, perhaps by playing a uncompromising fantasy RPG about backpacks.

Phil Savage

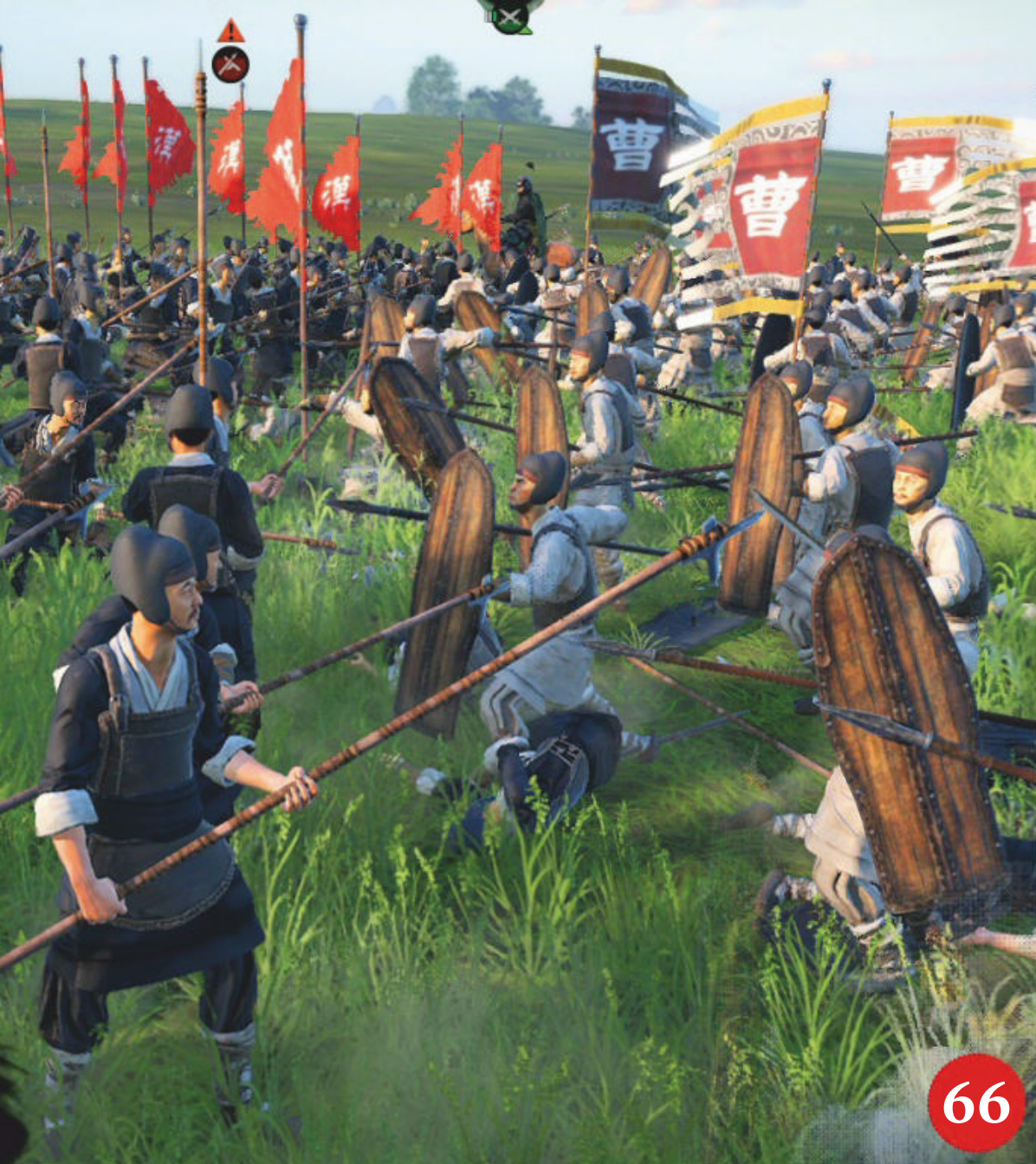
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EDITOR

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WHAT YOU THINK**

Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



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This month's ancient heroes...



JODY MACGREGOR
Specialist in Strategy
Currently playing *Total War: Three Kingdoms*
This month Ignored the battle, watched the duel.



RICK LANE
Specialist in Simulation
Currently playing *Anno 1800*
This month Defeated the miniboss of Industrial Revolution manufacture: sewing machines.



MALINDY HETFELD
Specialist in Adventure
Currently playing *Tales of the Neon Sea*
This month Explored a dystopian city by way of puzzles and minigames.



ANDY KELLY
Specialist in FPS
Currently playing *Rage 2*
This month Fell in love with a shotgun, not so much with a world. Or a car. Or 'edgy' banter.



CHRIS LIVINGSTON
Specialist in Survival
Currently playing *Outward*
This month Got very excited about his new backpack. It's got a lantern!



TOM SYKES
Specialist in Freebies
Currently playing *Breaker*
This month Couldn't choose between *Ikaruga* or *Breakout*. Picked 'all of the above'.



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in Retro
Currently playing *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*
This month Tried to remember if he was brave enough to tackle *Amnesia*.

REVIEW

Total War: Three Kingdoms



TRUE ROMANCE

For good and for bad, **TOTAL WAR: THREE KINGDOMS** certainly is a *Total War* game. *By Jody Macgregor*

Two of my generals dismount in the middle of a field to duel with their opposing numbers. The rest of the battle continues in the distance, but I've zoomed in to watch the flashy moves as the generals kick and stab each other instead. Occasionally a flurry of arrows or a riderless horse will pass in the background, but for the moment I'm intently focused on something that looks more like a game of *Tekken*.

Total War: Three Kingdoms embraces the story it's inspired by, Romance of the Three Kingdoms by Luo Guanzhong, rather than strict historical accuracy. Soldiers can run around the battlefield seemingly forever without getting tired. Their leaders are larger-than-life figures with complicated backstories and rivalries, who carry legendary spears and are able to defeat entire units single-handedly. Characters like Cao Cao are cast as devious opera-villain masterminds able to manipulate wars into existence at the drop of a hat, when the history books suggest he was a decent ruler and also quite a good poet.

There's an option to turn some of these things off at the start of a campaign by engaging Records Mode. With it, stamina plays a more important role in unit repositioning, and it also gets rid of the duels and gives generals bodyguards to do most

of the fighting instead. The alternative, Romance Mode, feels like an honest embrace of what *Total War* has really been all along, though. It's a version of history that's closer to an epic movie, where the broad sweep is familiar but the subtleties are ignored whenever they would be inconvenient to the action.

It's a version of history that's closer to an epic movie

That said, it's still the kind of epic where you'll also have to increase three different types of income by small percentages. The systems that were simplified for the *Warhammer* games or the trimmed-down *Thrones of Britannia* have returned to the party and brought some new friends. Espionage has its own menu full of options so that embedded spies can mess with trade or sabotage cities. Characters have a satisfaction score that will drop if they're not promoted regularly enough. Court positions that are unlocked as you level up have to be handed out carefully to

NEED TO KNOW

- WHAT IS IT? Turn-based kingdom management and real-time warfare in ancient China
- EXPECT TO PAY £45
- DEVELOPER Creative Assembly
- PUBLISHER Sega
- REVIEWED ON Windows 10, Intel Core i7, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GTX 1060
- MULTIPLAYER Local and online, battle or campaign
- LINK www.totalwar.com/games/three-kingdoms

prevent dissatisfied generals from starting a civil war. (You can also give them a nice water clock that will boost their satisfaction.)

MAKING PACTS

Diplomacy is one of the most substantial and welcome areas to be changed. Where before there was so much guesswork involved that dealing with rival nations felt like passing notes in class and then waiting for an answer ("Do you want to form a defensive alliance with me, y/n") in *Three Kingdoms* it's completely transparent.

Whenever I ask a neighbour for something there's a button to automatically figure out what it would take to make that deal work. It just straight-up tells you how much money will guarantee this trade of territory or food or even marriage, rather than making you stab in the dark then try again when it fails.

There's a finer grain to the diplomatic options as well. Between non-aggression pacts and alliances there are coalitions, unions that act as a step along the path to confederation without being guarantees of friendship forever. They allow for more than two members as well, so my Confederation to Defeat the Barbarians has new faction leaders lining up to join it on the regular.

Everyone in the coalition gets a vote on who is allowed in, so frequently someone like the bandit queen will rock up to the table and be voted against by a majority even before I get to make a decision, leaving just a button that lets me acknowledge her application while sadly declining it on this occasion.

It feels like being part of an exclusive high school clique everyone wants in on but, my god, did you see what Zheng Jiang wore to Brad's party? Request denied.

WELCOME CHANGES

Diplomacy has been a weak point for *Total War* even as other systems have improved, so these are welcome

WHICH WARLORD? Some of your options



GONGSUN ZAN
Militaristic. Unfortunate nickname: "The Iron Fist General".



ZHENG JIANG
Raised in poverty. Historically, may have been two separate people.



SUN JIAN
The heroic Tiger of Jiangdong. Beloved by all. Likely to be betrayed.



LIU BEI
Humble. Virtuous. Inspiring. Also quite likely to be betrayed.

Total War: Three Kingdoms

changes. So is the quick deal button, which lets you immediately see who is open to trade or vassalhood or whatever rather than having to scroll down a list.

Vassals are an important part of *Three Kingdoms*, with factions much more eager to suggest handing some of their income over to you in perpetuity, though they may demand a degree of autonomy at the same time. Your enemies can even submit themselves to vassalage under your allies as a last-ditch attempt to end wars, forcing you to either give up on your conquest or upset the ally in question.

WORLD OF WARLORDS

Rather than choosing a faction at the start of a campaign you choose an individual leader. Some of them are warlords with varying degrees of legitimacy to their attempt to take charge of China, some of them are straight-up bandits, and one of them is Dhong Zhuo, a tyrant who begins the campaign with the current child-Emperor as a hostage.

These very different characters can make for very different starts – Cao Cao, the suggested beginner's choice, feels more like traditional *Total War* in that you have a decent settlement, an army, and a neighbour to defeat so you can complete your first province (here called a commandery). Meanwhile, Liu Bei has an army full of legendary generals but no home and has to defeat an army of Yellow Turban rebels before settling anywhere.

Each character has a different mechanic that defines them too. Gongsun Zan's military government adds a unique court position for military inspectors, while Sun Jian's fluctuating heroism score affects the

price of troops and the satisfaction of characters. Cao Cao earns a handful of credibility points every turn and can spend them to influence the feelings of other factions, or even blow 75 of them at once initiating a proxy war between others while seeming to have clean hands.

That extra degree of manipulation makes the diplomacy even more fun. It's like the way the high elves worked in *Total War: Warhammer 2* but with even more ability to be a devious jerk. Being able to get right into the guts of diplomacy like this makes the campaign side of *Three Kingdoms* more impactful, and after a certain point every turn begins with a parade of messages about who has turned on who. They pop up

alongside images of the leaders pulling intense faces that make them hard to take seriously. It's all a bit "Friendship ended with KINGDOM OF WU, now KINGDOM OF WEI is my best friend".

Other parts of the turn-based campaign side of *Three Kingdoms* are less jolly. Population is important – a high rate of growth, from constructing the right buildings, can increase your armies' replenishment rate but also cause overpopulation, the main culprit of public disorder. Having too many people puts a strain on food supply.

Meanwhile, you want to keep constructing buildings that earn money and increase prestige (which is how you unlock higher ranks, fill out your court, and eventually declare yourself one of China's three kings).

I can't say working my way through upgrades of various buildings has ever been my favourite part of *Total War* and when you control something on the north side of 20 settlements managing all this construction can be a real bore.

On the upside each member of your court can be given an assignment, attaching them to a settlement and giving it some kind of bonus. You don't need to march them around the map to do this – like espionage it's just a menu. It feels like a way of keeping some of the things agents and heroes did in former games, but abstracted enough that they aren't an annoyance. It also keeps them off the map so it's free for actual armies to do their thing.

According to one point of view, all this stuff on the campaign map and its multitude of attached menus – I haven't even mentioned the reforms, a tech tree mapped onto a picture of an actual tree where each improvement lights up a blossom of petals – is just scene-setting for the battles. And it's true that it gives them context that can make the next siege feel different to the last one no matter how similar they actually are in play.

I enjoy the campaign for its own sake though, even if it can occasionally be too mathematical for its own good. For an example of that look no further than the way it takes an important theme of Romance of the Three Kingdoms like corruption, personified by traitorous eunuchs who nepotistically manipulate their friends into positions they don't deserve while the country falls apart. In *Total War: Three Kingdoms* corruption is a percentage modifier that impacts your income. It's so prosaic it's almost funny.

THE POINTY END

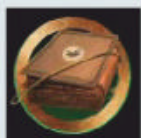
The real-time battles are more immediately exciting than the numbers game. Units with crossbows chunter out steady volley after volley of bolts, horseriders form up into wedges at the last minute and charge, infantry lock down their shields and absorb damage. Formations are back and there are plenty of them, though it's not always easy to get access to them. There are multiple classes of general to choose from and strategists, while weaker, are necessary because they learn formations as they level up.

Some followers have access to them as well, so assigning a herdsman to the general with a cavalry retinue means they'll know the wedge formation.

An army can have three generals, each with a retinue of up to six units. This lends itself to balanced armies

These very different characters can make for very different starts

ACCESSORIES *Stat buffs are the gift that keeps giving*



WUZI
Classic military strategy text. A real page-turner. Bonus to military supplies.



JADE MONKEY
It's a monkey but, like, made of jade. Bonus to cunning and satisfaction.



WEI LIAOZI
Argues for the importance of agriculture. Bonus to supplies.



WOODEN FISH
They can't all be jade monkeys. Bonus to resolve and satisfaction.

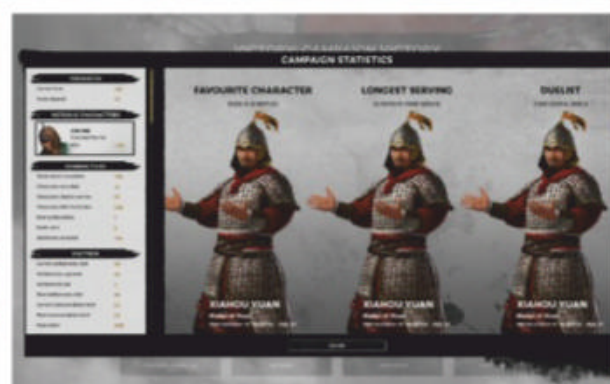




Nobody loves shouting "craven" as much as someone in *Total War*.

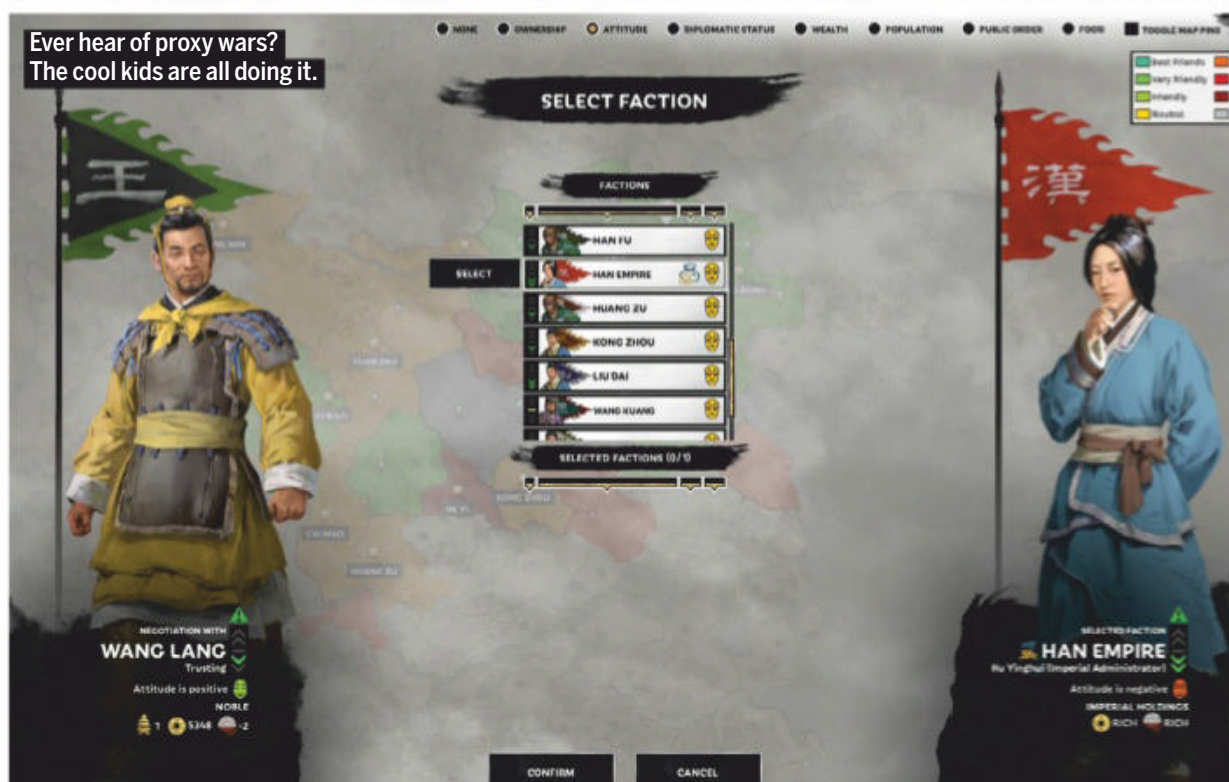


Rush and attack!





Pity the banner guy with no shield.



» with one general for cavalry, one for infantry, and one for archers and catapults. Which is not to say you can't make unbalanced or hyper-specialised armies, it just feels wrong. Generals have personalities that suit their roles, expressed as they banter with each other during battles. They even gain traits and develop rivalries and friendships with each other the longer they spend together. You want to build them and arm them like party members in an RPG.

Units don't have as much personality. A lot of them look similar, or fill similar roles. Now that the *Warhammer* games exist it's always going to be hard to compete on that front, because no matter how different two kinds of rider are they're never going to be as immediately distinct as orcs or vampires. On the personality front, it doesn't help that units will sometimes stand in place and let you shoot them for a bit too long before doing something about it, or ignore a target you left open and charge the wrong one. Of course the AI has never been the shining high point of *Total War* so if you're along for the ride you're used to this by now.

While generals have attack animations right out of kung-fu movies, when ordinary soldiers collide there's a lot of milling around and swiping at the air going on. Of course there's none of the over-the-top madness of the *Warhammer* games because there aren't hydras breathing fire or giants swinging tree trunks around, but there's also none of the individual clashes that made *Shogun 2* so much fun to watch. It's fine from a distance, but unrewarding if you like to hit the slow-motion button, press K to make the HUD fall away, and watch things up close.

NIGHT FIGHT

Night battles do look gorgeous, though. Troops carry red lanterns on poles and cities under siege fill the sky with floating paper lanterns like low-hanging stars. Battles during winter take place on maps covered in high-contrast snow, while at other times of year farmers might be working in paddy fields as you ride past. Port cities have cranes on the docks and boats in the harbour.

HISTORICAL BATTLES *History is another word for spoilers*



BATTLE OF RED CLIFFS

Cao Cao controls the north. Sun Quan and Zhuge Liang unite the south against him, hoping he will rely on his fleet of flammable boats.



CONQUEST IN JIANGDONG

After taking the Wu commandery Sun Ce convinces his uncle to join forces. Together they march on Wu Lang in the Qiantang estuary.



THE INVASION OF JING PROVINCE

Sun Quan, after lending control of Jing Province to Liu Bei, turns against him.

There are no naval battles, though. They've given up on them completely it seems, and while armies board ships when they head onto the water encounters at sea are resolved automatically. Given how important rivers like the Yangtze are to China strategically it's a missed opportunity. Imagine if John Woo's movie *Red Cliff*, after hours of build-up, ended with someone clicking autoresolve.

BATTLEFIELD BULLY

Anticlimax is a problem with *Three Kingdoms* more generally. At a certain point in the campaign the three leading warlords are declared kings and have to fight it out to determine who will be sole emperor.

When I marched a decent army into my first opponent's territory they abdicated and surrendered to me, so I switched my attention to the final remaining enemy, the Kingdom of Wu. After many turns spent

building armies as strong as my economy allowed, I sent one full stack the long way around via the water to attack his capital from behind while the rest of my armies marched on our shared border capturing villages and small cities.

After a few seasons of this I finally drew his full force out. Wu's best armies stayed close together, but one set itself up in ambush nearby. I discovered it thanks to one of my generals having keen eyes, attacked with superior numbers, and defeated it handily. The rest of his forces were still formidable though, and mine slightly weakened by wiping out the failed

ambush. We faced off for the climactic finale. And then on his turn a diplomacy pop-up informed me he wanted to surrender and abdicate.

A relatively bloodless victory is nice and all, and it's a credit to the AI that it knows when it's about to be beaten, but it was a hell of a downer way to end a campaign. I could have said no to the offer and carried on the war but it would have felt like bullying at that point. As I said, the campaign lends context to the battles, and sometimes that context can take away from them as well.

Plenty of these criticisms — an underwhelming endgame, or clunky battle animations, or AI oddness — have been true of other *Total War* games. *Three Kingdoms* is no worse than many of them and better than quite a few. It's easily in my top five games in the series.

I look forward to seeing how things like the diplomacy system and maybe duels carry on into *Warhammer 3* and what comes next, it's just hard to look past *Three Kingdoms'* role as an iteration on a formula rather than a game in itself.

That's the problem with there being so many of them, and their releases so regular. A new one comes out while the last two are still fresh in our memories. *Three Kingdoms* is a very good strategy game for when you want to experience 2nd century China, and I've spent dozens of enjoyable hours with it. When you zoom in close on the right details, whether two generals duelling or an enemy turning the vassal system against you, it's grand. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

This ranks as my fourth or maybe fifth favourite *Total War* game, which is still a good thing to be.

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ENTRAIL BLAZING

MORTAL KOMBAT 11 sets the standard for storytelling in fighting games. *By Matt Elliott*

It might seem like lunacy to begin a *Mortal Kombat* review by praising the game's subtlety. You've watched videos of eyes being plopped out and spines being crushed. But there's a moment, early in the game's story mode, which encapsulates how the series has evolved. Reunited, Kitana and Liu Kang share a hug. Liu goes to embrace her – but he can't. He's too awkward, she's too important. It tells you everything about their relationship without a word being spoken.

Right now, 13-year-old me is being mime-sick. Subtlety? Hugs? Relationships? Get out. But the stuff that defines *Mortal Kombat* is also here in gore-soaked, self-aware spades. The fighting is the best it's ever been. The fatalities are sickeningly inventive. There are enough unlockables to keep you busy for ages. But it's the story mode that stands out, putting together 27 years of *MK* lore into something that's like the best bits of a Marvel movie.

The new villain, Kronika, feels like Thanos and Galadriel's lovechild. Her plan is to rewrite time to prevent an authoritarian Raiden from upsetting the balance of the universe by beheading Shinnok. It's an effective, morally-ambiguous setup, similar to what NetherRealm did with *Injustice*. The temporal gymnastics also mean that classic versions of the game's heroes return, alongside the revenant versions seen in *MK X*. It's an absolute thrill for anyone who's followed the series, and it's a smart way of starting afresh. Some moments, such as Jax wrestling with his past as a revenant, are surprisingly poignant. Others, like Johnny Cage bickering with his ass-hat younger self, are just plain funny. It's the best story in a fighting game this side of *Injustice 2*.

None of this would matter if the fighting was guff. But this is as immediate, engaging, and rewarding as the series has ever been. It still has the same pick-up-and-play ease of previous *MK* games, but it's easier than ever to drill into the specifics that make this a competitive fighter.

Many elements have been refined. Instead of endless X-ray moves, we now have Fatal Blows – powerful one-shot attacks you use when your health is low. They can turn a losing round in your favour, but they can only be used once per match if they connect.

It's an absolute thrill for anyone who's followed the series

REVIEW-ALITY

Offensive and defensive meters have been separated, too. You now use the former to amplify certain attacks, making them more

powerful or strategically advantageous. And the defensive meter can be spent on things like

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Infinity War with cyber ninjas and deadly hats

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
NetherRealm

PUBLISHER
Warner Bros

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CPU
@ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM,
Nvidia GeForce GTX
1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
1-2

LINK
bit.ly/2BX2BF6

counterattacks and rolls that will get you out of the corner if pinned. And if this talk of meters and escape rolls has you worried, don't be – the tutorials are excellent. In fact, if you've never played a fighting game or never learnt about frame data, *MK 11* is absolutely the place to start.

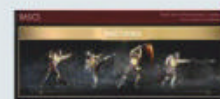
There's a deep level of customisation for each fighter. Skins, gear, entrances, abilities, and even AI behaviour can all be tinkered with, using unlockables earned by playing the game or exploring the Krypt mode. The latter is a third person adventure in which your generic explorer plunders Shang Tsung's island, knocking down crumbling walls and opening chests. Loot is randomised, but you can get some sense of what'll you'll get from how expensive each chest is. The third person implementation is fun – a throwback to *Deception*'s ridiculous Konquest mode – but the randomisation means it'll take you forever to unlock any specific stuff you want, and the cosmetic changes in *MK 11* feel less rewarding than the gear grind *Injustice 2*. While I was happy to spend too long opening loot boxes to unlock a cudgel for Swamp Thing, I'm less enthusiastic about doing the same for a palette-swapped costume for Erron Black.

Other decisions feel less nice. Time Crystals can be purchased with real money and used in the store to buy any of the five premium items on sale. You can also buy easy fatalities, which is a weird way to deal with what feels like an accessibility option. NetherRealm is promising to tweak the systems to reduce the grind, but a complete overhaul seems unlikely. Right now, there's no way to buy everything you want with actual cash, even if you wanted to. ■

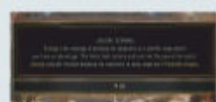
FIGHT KLUB

Want to learn how fighting games work? Try MK 11's tutorial

Mortal Kombat 11 has an incredible tutorial mode. As well as teaching you how the game plays, it's the perfect foundation for understanding almost every other fighting game.



1 The tutorial starts with the basics – things like movement, blocking and special moves.



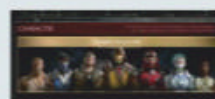
2 This breaks down tactics for specific types of play, allowing you to work on things like zoning.



3 Combo inputs are shown with little hourglass symbols so you can work perfecting your timing.



4 Colour-coded attacks explain frame data, showing which moves leave you at an advantage or disadvantage.

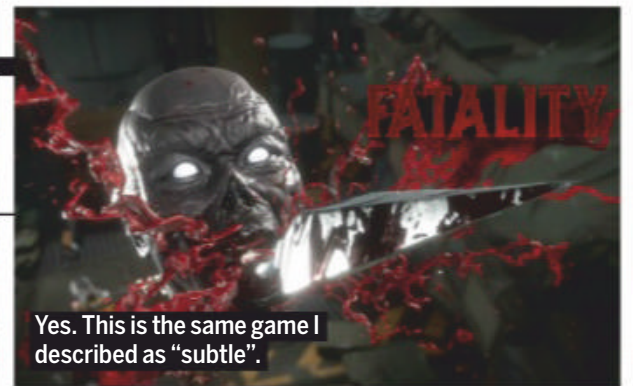


5 There are also tutorials for each character, so you've got no excuse to still be using Scorpion.

PC GAMER VERDICT

A deep, customisable fighter that just happens to include the best videogame movie never made.

85



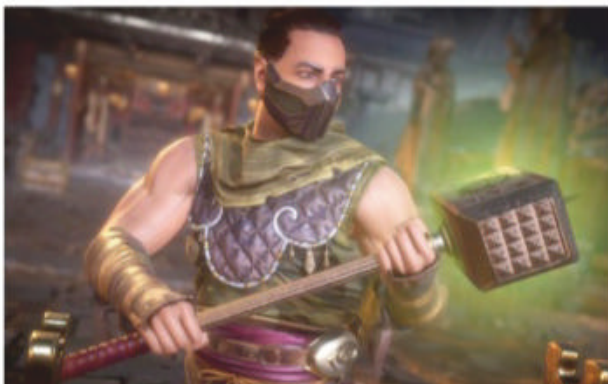
Yes. This is the same game I described as "subtle".



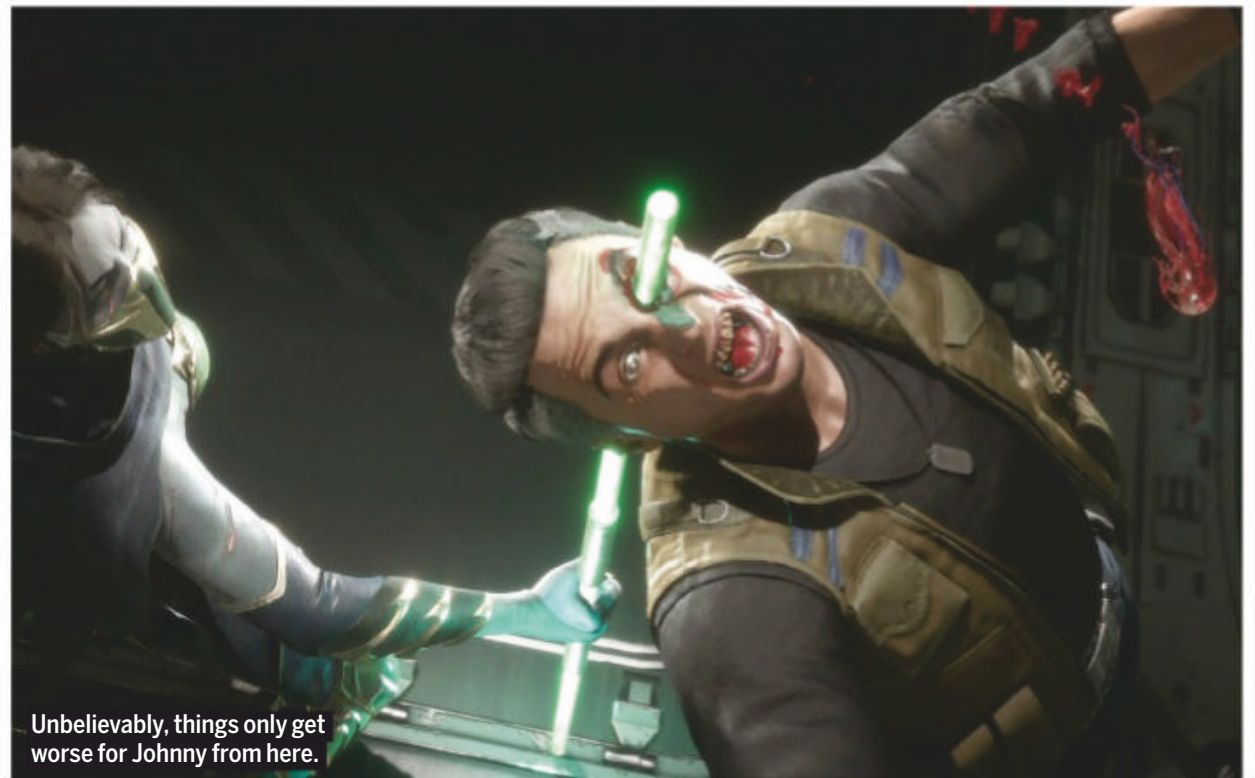
Baraka was delighted with his elegant new loincloth



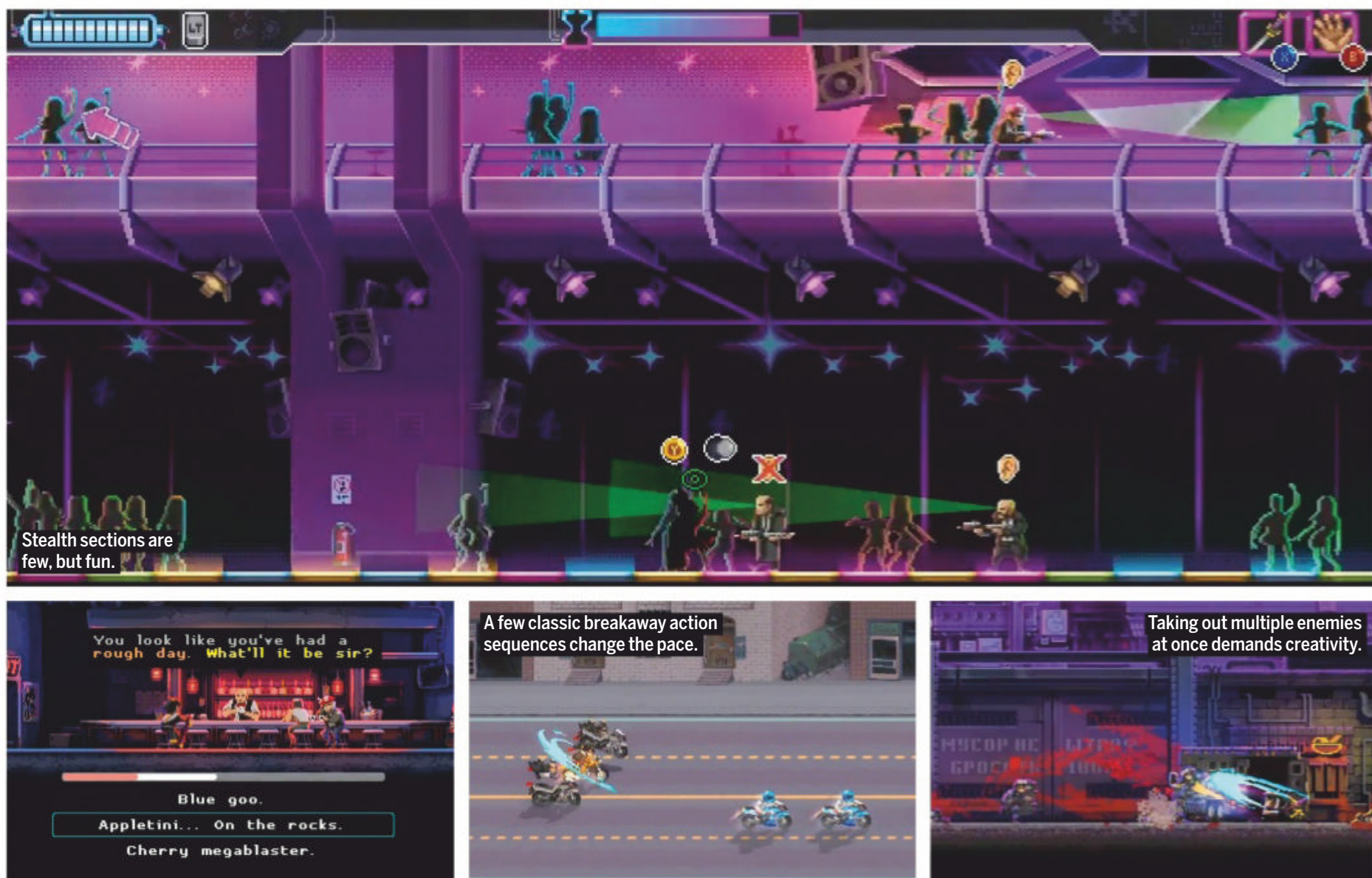
Don't shoot Kano. It just makes him unhappy.



Guillermo Del Toro's Lord of the Rings: unconventional



Unbelievably, things only get worse for Johnny from here.



STATE OF REPLAY

Time-bending action platformer **KATANA ZERO** is a puzzle full of payoffs. *By Lauren Morton*

In the back halls of a nightclub, in pursuit of a drug-dealing DJ, I watch four pompadoured gangsters hazing the newest member of the Skinny Rickys. I'm outnumbered, but close by are three bottles and a butcher's knife. If I sprint up and throw the makeshift murder tools with four fast button presses, I can take them all down. So I do.

With their heads on the floor, I'm able to take out the guys with guns above them who are conveniently standing in the path of several deactivated lasers, the switch for which is on the wall beside me covered in Ricky guts. After frying those two, I jump and slash through the floorboards of another room, killing one mobster in the process and slowing time to deflect the bullet of the second one back in his face. That's the plan, anyway. It only takes me eight tries to pull it off.

Like *Hotline Miami* and other action puzzlers, *Katana Zero*'s levels are tightly designed with multiple possible ways to hack and slash my way through them. The protagonist is a gritty, urban samurai. His toolkit of abilities is small enough to quickly develop muscle memory around but adaptable enough to make the

combat encounters varied. He has a sword – good for stabbing enemies, deflecting bullets, or smashing down doors to kill anyone unfortunate enough to be standing near them. He can roll to avoid damage, which is important given that being hit by an enemy even once is instant death. He can pick up and throw helpfully placed objects. And he can slow time to a crawl for a limited duration thanks to an illicit drug he's getting from his psychologist.

I have to chain together slowed attacks with realtime ones

Slowing time is *Katana Zero*'s core ability, and turns what would otherwise be an unfair challenge into a tactical tango. But it's a scant resource that can seldom get me out of danger alone. I have to chain together slowed attacks with realtime ones or I'll wind up with an empty slow-mo tank while the bullets and fists are still flying.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A strategic action slash-em-up with visual novel bookends

EXPECT TO PAY
£12

DEVELOPER
Askiisoft

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, Intel i7 8700k, 16GB RAM, NVIDIA GeForce GTX 970.

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
www.katanaZero.com

AT ONE WITH THE BLADE

Nightly interactions with other characters are a welcome break from the death treadmill. They work a bit like a Telltale game conversation in which I have a certain amount of time to decide on my character's response. My favourite part is that while another person is talking, I'll usually also have the option to interrupt them with a more aggressive or heated answer that prevents them from finishing their sentence.

Despite the great dialogue system, the narrative itself is pretty standard urban dystopian territory. The government is shady and corrupt. The protagonist lives in a ramshackle apartment. He's a victim of said shady government and his own unfortunate circumstances. But while its characters don't bring any new angles to the neon and noir cityscape, *Katana Zero*'s frenetic, improvisational action make it well worth your time. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Thoughtfully-designed levels and versatile combat abilities make *Katana Zero* worthy of a rewind.

79

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URBAN OUTFITTER

ANNO 1800 is a compelling, if somewhat idiosyncratic city-builder. *By Rick Lane*

Anno 1800 belongs to a select group of games that I like to refer to as “blink and it’s 2am” games. For example, you might sit down in an evening with the plan of setting up your first steel mill. Then you blink and it’s 2am and you’ve somehow founded a colony in the New World. Alternatively, perhaps you set the goal of reaching the next population milestone to unlock a new building. Then you do that, and the building you unlock is a zoo for which you can build individual enclosures to fill with several dozen type of animals. Blink.

This is comfortably the most engrossing city-builder I’ve played since *Cities: Skylines*, one that combines an intriguing theme with some enjoyably complex production chains and trading mechanics. It also has a wealth of buildings to construct and resources to produce, letting you construct some truly impressive and enormous urban sprawls.

Anno 1800 puts you in the hobnailed boots of an up-and-coming business magnate in the burning heart of the industrial revolution. There are three ways to play, Campaign, Sandbox, and Multiplayer. Structurally, they’re all basically the same – the campaign is itself a gigantic sandbox that happens to feature a chain of missions to follow.

Whichever way you choose to play, you start out in charge of a western-European island with nothing but a trading post to your name. Your first goal is to build a

simple farming village, which acts as the foundation for your city. From here, your objective is to grow a bustling metropolis that will stretch its tendrils to the horizon and beyond.

You’ll need acres of potato fields that can be distilled into schnapps

CLASS WARFARE

In its early stages, *Anno 1800* is a straight-up city-builder. Progress in *Anno* is predicated upon two things – population growth and

meeting the needs and wants of your citizens. Each “class” of person has a different set of requirements that you need to meet. Farmers, for example, simply require clothes and fish to subsist. But to make them happy, you need to ply them with alcohol (just like real life!). You’ll need acres of potato fields that can be distilled into schnapps, while also ensuring all farmsteads are within staggering distance of a pub.

The better you meet those needs, the more people will fill the houses of your village. Once a farmhouse reaches its maximum population, it

can then be upgraded to house the next class of citizen – workers.

This unlocks the next evolutionary stage of your settlement, letting you construct more advanced buildings like brickworks and breweries.

However, workers are considerably more particular in their needs and wants, going so far as to demand soap, the fops!

At the same time your production lines become increasingly convoluted. Creating wood to build farmhouses, for example, requires a lumberjack’s yard, a sawmill, and a warehouse to store the goods. Creating steel beams, on the other hand, requires both an iron-mine and a coalmine for the raw materials, a smelting plant to create steel ingots, and finally a steelworks to forge the beams. The larger factories also require dozens, even hundreds of workers to function, meaning you need the supporting infrastructure in place to keep them fed, watered, and clean.

This is where *Anno 1800*’s “blink and it’s 2am” qualities start to reveal themselves. Once you unlock the third tier of citizen, Artisans, you’ll need an infrastructure capable of supporting the production of sewing machines, fur coats, and rum. The latter of these, of course, requires raw materials that don’t grow in a European climate. So to acquire these, you need to build ships and send them to explore the New World.

The New World is represented on an entirely different map, and has unique citizen types, production chains, and resources. This effectively means a game of *Anno 1800* plays out on two unique RTS maps at once, which has all sorts of tactical considerations if you’re playing in multiplayer. You could be the king of steel in the Old World, only to find your economy collapsing because someone in the New World stole an island that produces all your cotton.

Either way, you’ll need to set up trade routes to get these exotic goods to your increasingly needy (and populous) citizenry. It’s worth noting

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Expansive city-builder themed around the industrial revolution

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Blue Byte

PUBLISHER
Ubisoft

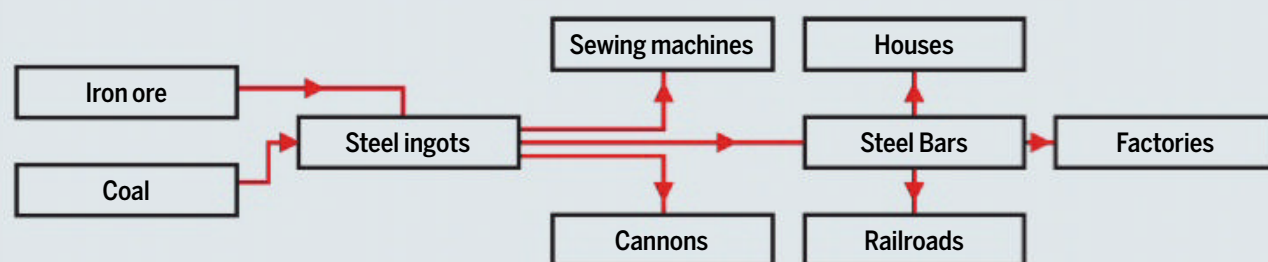
REVIEWED ON
Nvidia GTX Titan, Intel core i5-3570K 3.40 GHZ, 16 GB RAM

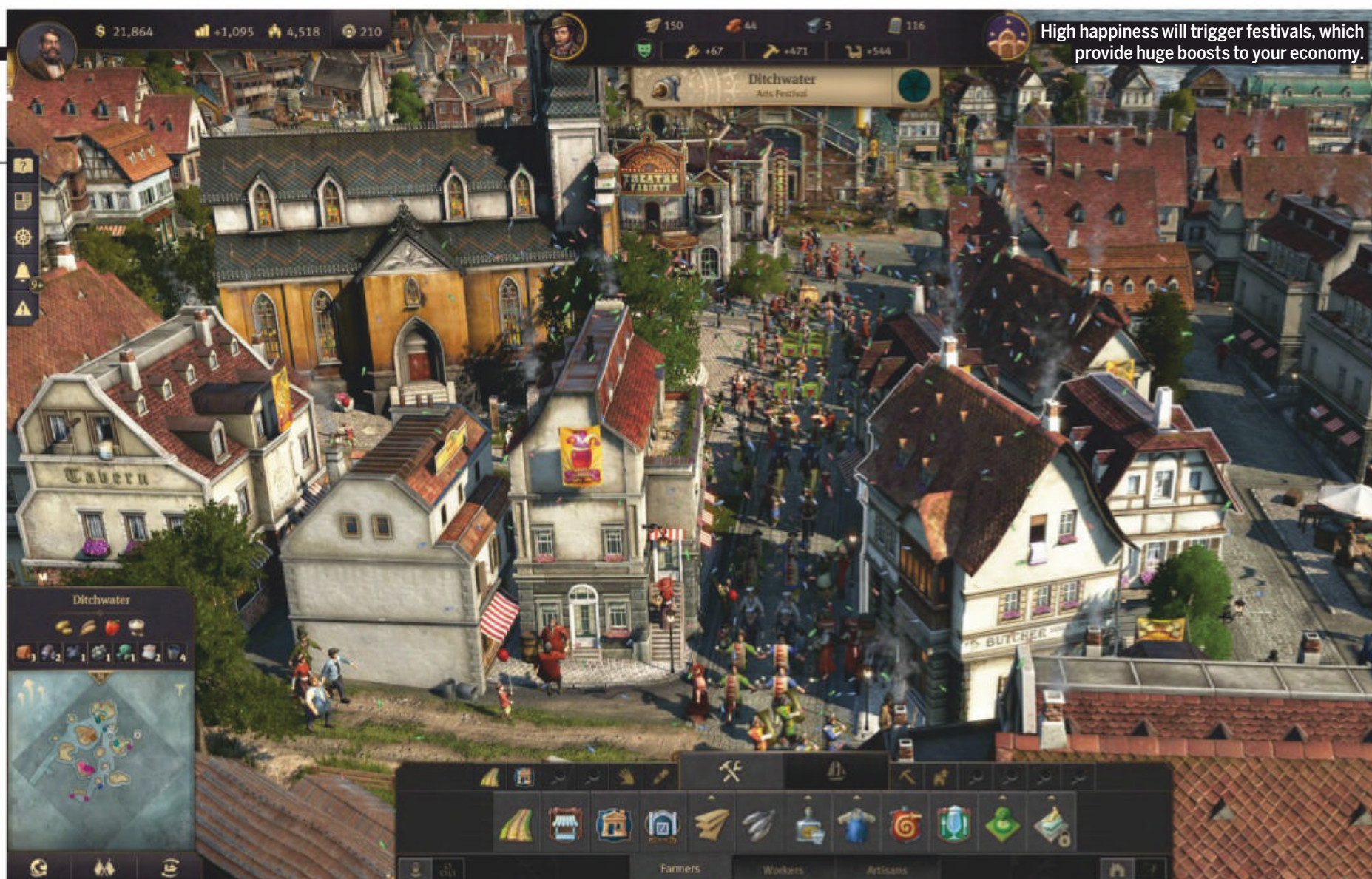
MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
www.ubisoft.com/en-gb/game/anno-1800

THE FLOW OF STEEL

Here are some of the places that steel ends up in its various forms





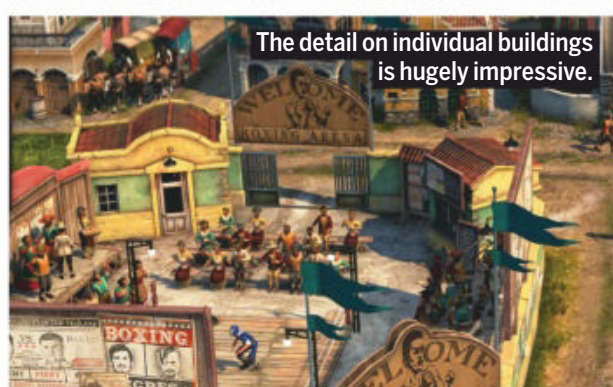
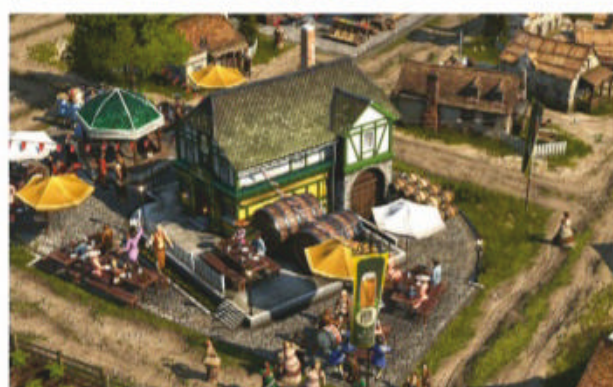
Newspaper stories can increase or decrease happiness, although you can force the editor to print propaganda.



There are a huge number of buildings to construct.



Whether your settlement is a farming village or a bustling metropolis, Anno 1800 is incredibly pretty.



at this point that both sides of *Anno*'s city-construction are wonderful to watch in motion.

The game has a slightly painterly aesthetic that complements the detail of its models and animations beautifully. Your fields of wheat and sugarcane are abuzz with workers, while carriages pulled by horses transport resources to the next stage of production.

These details evolve with your city, too. Clothing fashions change as your city becomes more advanced, while your horse-drawn carriages will increasingly give way to railroads and even bicycles. Such intimate detail does mean *Anno 1800* is quite performance heavy. Viewing larger cities from certain angles will likely cause a significant dip in framerate on low-to-medium spec machines.

BEER BARON

As your production chains expand and the desires of your people grow, the strategic side of *Anno 1800* begins to show its teeth. At one point I discovered my starting island couldn't produce beer, as the soil wasn't fertile for growing hops. My people quietly informed me of this by staging a massive riot that obliterated my production and almost cost me my game. Needless to say, I promptly colonised a nearby island and set up a second settlement dedicated almost entirely to the production of beer, then organised a trade route to ferry this vitally important resource on to the mainland.

The way all *Anno*'s systems interlock is impressive. If you're struggling to create a resource yourself, then you can purchase it via your trading post. Yet doing this puts you at the behest of other players (or the AI if you're playing singleplayer). At the same time, you can sell surplus produce from your settlements for profit. But even a burgeoning economy isn't a guarantee of success. You still need to be able to either create or acquire the right resources to push your city deeper into the technological age.

In its later stages *Anno* becomes a blend of industrial-scale plate-spinning with some broad-strokes RTS thrown in. As competition for resources becomes fiercer, you may need to wrest control of islands from

SOCIAL STRATA

A breakdown of worker classes



FARMERS
The foundation of your settlement. They mostly enjoy fish and pubs.



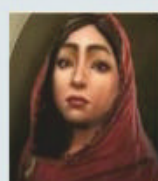
JONGELEROS
The New World equivalent of farmers. Subsist on plantains and rum.



WORKERS
The men and women who support your heavy industries.



ARTISANS
Foppish craftsmen, these enlightened ladies and gents thrive on culture.



OBEROS
Oberos occupy the middle ground between workers and artisans.



ENGINEERS
Engineers are the technological marvels of *Anno*'s late-game.

your opponents. This can be done either through military force, deploying fleets of gunboats and frigates to lay siege to their ports. Or you can purchase shares in the island you desire, ultimately taking control in one fell financial swoop.

For the most part, I think *Anno*'s core systems are elegantly balanced.

At times it can make you feel stretched, especially if multiple random events like fires happen at once. Even when I had to pause a new project to upgrade a bunch of houses or relocate a low-level farm,

however, I never felt bogged down in micromanagement.

That said, I do want to highlight one curious idiosyncrasy. Given the game's core theme of a shift from an agrarian to an urbanised society, it's surprising that employment is not more of a consideration. In fact, *Anno 1800*'s attitude to employment is the polar opposite of the period it is based on. Each household earns a set income regardless of whether the people who live there have a job in the city or not. This effectively encourages you to have a large surplus of unemployed citizens, as each new house you build brings in that much more coin. As long as you can meet their needs, it's perfectly

fine to have hundreds of people sitting around doing nothing.

CASH FLOW

I'm not sure whether this counts as a flaw per-se, as there's more than enough complexity to grapple with ensuring all your different citizens are sufficiently catered for. It's just odd given how the game is otherwise very conscious of the changing times it represents. A harder problem is that *Anno 1800* doesn't provide enough tools to track your in-game finances. Your income and expenses are constantly fluctuating, and those ever-shifting numbers can make it hard to gauge how well your colony is actually doing. Normally I'd sooner eat my own keyboard than look at a graph in a videogame, but I think *Anno 1800* would benefit from a bell-curve or two.

By far *Anno 1800*'s biggest issue, however, is the appalling and incessant yammering of its AI players. *Anno 1800*'s story campaign features a cast of characters that are fully written and voiced. I really wish it didn't. The acting is hammier than a Doctor Who Christmas special, particularly that of your in-game nemesis Edvard Goode, who would twirl his moustache right off his face if he actually sported one.

Worse yet is the writing of the AI barks, which are often totally inane and uttered every time they interact with you, whether it's an automated trade or simply a slight decline in diplomatic relations. One AI character declares "I can finally get rid of that pent-up gas!" literally every five minutes. This may seem like a minor problem, but it's incredibly distracting from what is otherwise a gentle yet utterly absorbing game, like an episode of *Better Call Saul* being interrupted by the appearance of Keith Lemon.

Script carbuncles aside, *Anno 1800* is a rich and sumptuous city-builder, easily the grandest and deepest *Anno* to date. Its early game is a wonderfully relaxing experience, while the later stages will have you scratching your mutton-chops and happily stretching your braces in equal measure. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Despite an annoying story mode, *Anno 1800* is the biggest and best entry in the series to date.

84

For the most part *Anno*'s core systems are elegantly balanced

CYBERPUNK SLEUTH

In **TALES OF THE NEON SEA: CHAPTER 1-3**,
the future is puzzling. *By Malindy Hetfeld*

Point-and-click adventures have had a bit of a renaissance over the last few years. Increasingly the genre has cast aside its penchant for pun-filled mischief, and instead focused on being a great vehicle for investigative narratives. *Tales of the Neon Sea* borrows from well-known cyberpunk sources but, alongside its brighter aesthetic, it takes a deeper look at the technical aspects of cyberpunk, rather than the moral ones.

The plot itself is conventional. One day the alcoholic augmented P.I. Mr Mist stumbles onto the corpse of his elderly neighbour, well-known for her hate of androids. At first the case seems clear: the household android must have done it. But the evidence you uncover paints a much more gruesome picture. Weirdly enough, you're not so much interested in the killer as you are in the android and what could have driven it to become a possible accomplice. And so you dive into the underworld to find out more, aided by the helping paw of Mr Mist's stray cat friend William. The influence of organised gangs of cats in our future is underrepresented.

Neon Sea isn't trying to be narrative-focused – long stretches of game time pass with nary a word – instead it offers fantastical technology and lets you mess with all the various machinery and automatisms that run a city. At its most basic, the game assumes that in a future filled with different contraptions, a whole lot of

it will be in disrepair, which fits the slightly grimy Blade Runner-esque aesthetic. At its most interesting, the game uses technology to hold plot-relevant secrets. Whatever the reason, there is a whole lot of

dismantling, rewiring and pressing of buttons. Seriously, *Neon Sea* is stuffed to the gills with puzzles, to the point where even Mr Mist makes fun of their number by exclaiming variations of “why

would anyone do this?”. Chances are that any classic environmental puzzle you've ever solved in a game appears in *Neon Sea* in some way. A lot of it requires you to have your hands deep in the innards of a machine, fixing circuitry or reconnecting valves. This can sometimes feel as if a familiar type of puzzle has simply gained a coat of cyberpunk paint.

IT'S TOOL TIME

At a crime scene, you use your augmented senses to find clues. Taking an in-depth look at anything

Mr Mist stumbles onto the corpse of his elderly neighbour

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The first three of four episodes of a futuristic point and click puzzler

EXPECT TO PAY
£13.49

DEVELOPER
Palm Pioneer

PUBLISHER
Zodiac Interactive

REVIEWED ON
Core i5-8400, GTX 1060, 16 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
www.zodiacinteractive.com

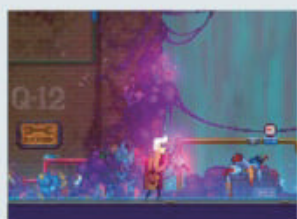
that seems out of place on a special investigation screen uncovers some information, and for a closer look you can also examine evidence with your mechanical eye. Putting the clues together into a picture that makes sense is a puzzle in itself, one that *Neon Sea* represents through gears of a clock. Put them in the right order to metaphorically turn back time and you'll see what happened. To open your way or satisfy a request, you build computer chips and futuristic tools such as lasers. As in any good adventure game this is mostly trial and error, especially since you build most of what you need from junk. You don't carry a large inventory with you, so finding combinations never gets frustrating. If anything, *Neon Sea* hands you the answers.

How good you are with valve and lever puzzles should tell you should tell you how much you will enjoy yourself. I had fun with it all, surprised by interesting variations of the same puzzle mechanic, but I can't help but think a lot of potential was squandered due to the relentless pace of puzzling at the expense of narrative. The city is full of interesting characters, but you get to know the world entirely through text and hardly ever have conversations. In the latter half of the game, the plot is all but abandoned before you reach an abrupt end. Currently, *Tales of the Neon Sea* isn't finished, and a final chapter will be released this autumn.

It's entirely too easy to forget you're supposed to solve a murder with all the puzzles burying an otherwise interesting case. *Tales of the Neon Sea* turned its wealth of ideas into a fun game, but a bit more balance between the thematic and the mechanical would've turned it into something striking. ■

PUSH THE BUTTON

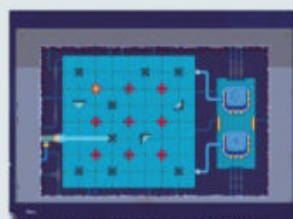
Some standout puzzles to wrap your head around



1 Right at the start there's an entertaining valve puzzle to retrieve your hat.



2 Public transport is always a puzzle. Didn't think I'd see it in a game.



3 This tile puzzle with lasers was my personal *Dark Souls* of puzzling.

PC GAMER VERDICT

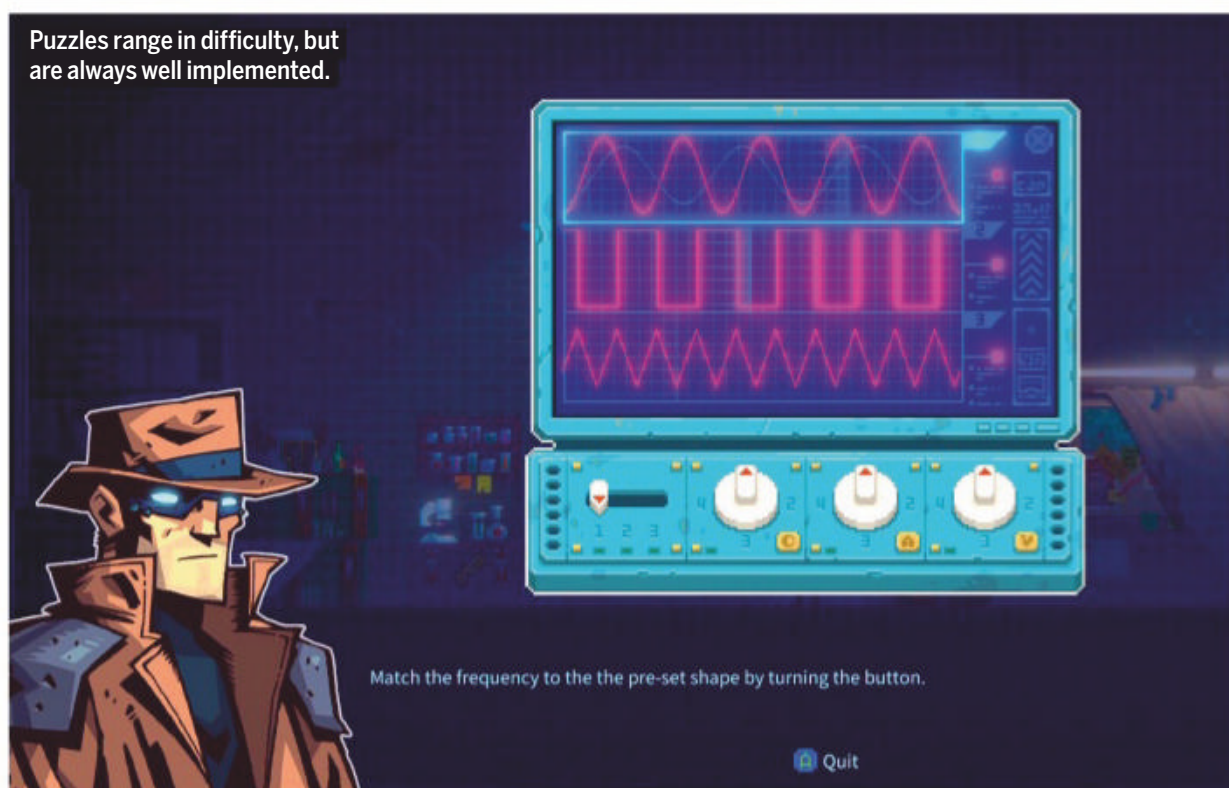
Neon Sea is an overall lovingly crafted adventure slightly let down by structure and writing.

75

The city offers amazing levels of detail and stunning lighting effects.



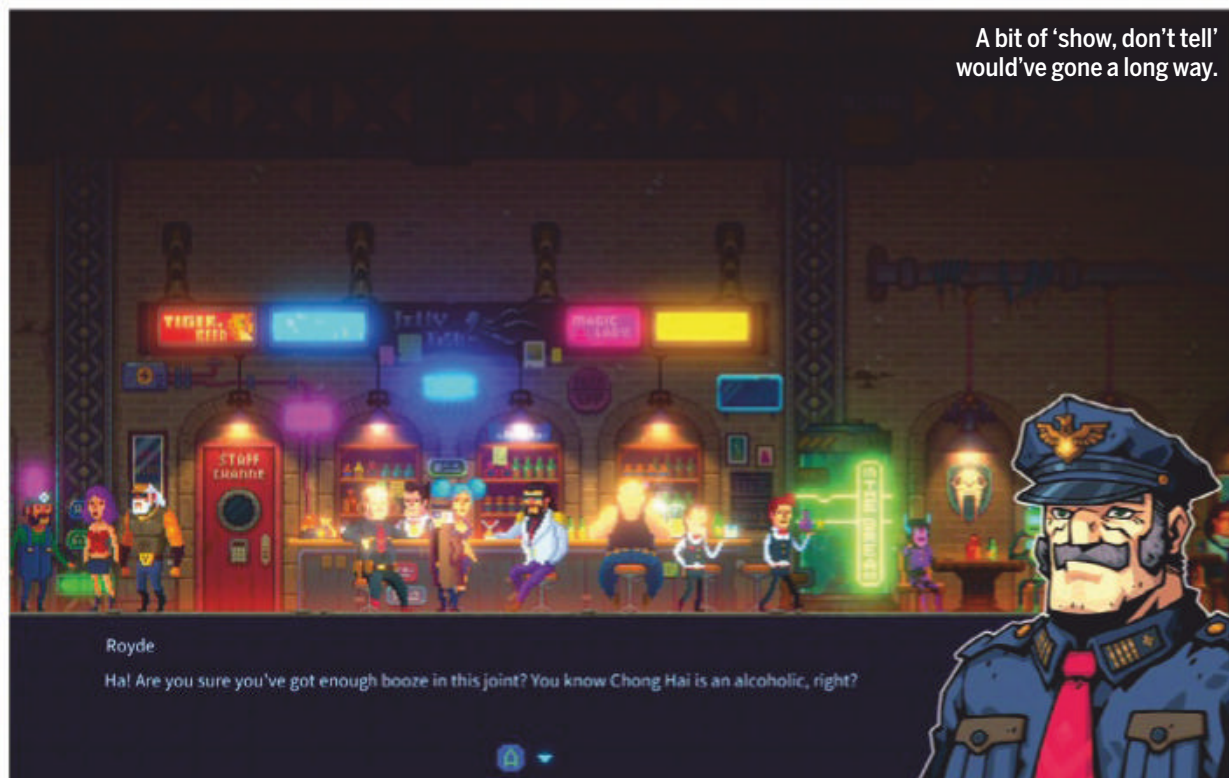
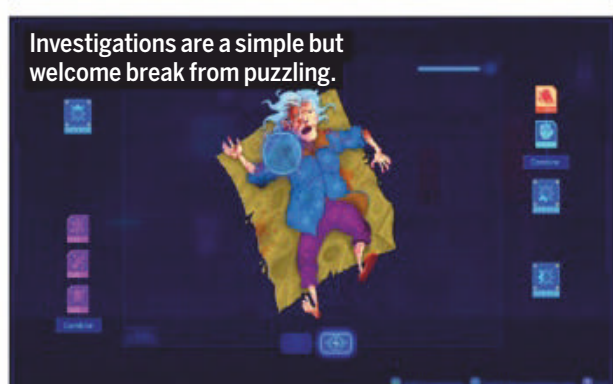
Puzzles range in difficulty, but are always well implemented.



Chinese dev Palm Pioneer modelled the future after their home.



Investigations are a simple but welcome break from puzzling.



A bit of 'show, don't tell' would've gone a long way.

Royde:
Ha! Are you sure you've got enough booze in this joint? You know Chong Hai is an alcoholic, right?

FURY ROAD

RAGE 2 is an exceptional shooter
cursed by a bland world. *By Andy Kelly*

If a single weapon contains the essence of a first-person shooter, it's undoubtedly the shotgun. Early in *Rage 2* protagonist Walker – a wasteland ranger who can be either male or female, depending on your preference – finds a futuristic combat shotgun hidden away in an Ark, a kind of advanced fallout shelter designed to protect humanity and its precious technology from a cataclysmic asteroid impact. *Rage 2* has a lot of problems, including a forgettable open world, but man, that shotgun. The instant you fire it, you know, everything else aside, it's a quality FPS.

This semi-automatic weapon of mass destruction is loud, violent, and obnoxious – a bit like *Rage 2* itself, in fact. When you unload a round of buckshot into a hapless enemy you can almost feel the shockwave rippling through your shoulder. But it's the alternate fire mode, activated by holding the right mouse button, that really makes it special. The spread tightens and the force of the impact increases massively. Enemies are thrown savagely backwards, into walls, over railings, off the side of cliffs and whatever else there is.

And you're going to need firepower like this to stop The Authority, an army of mechanical mutants marauding across the sun-scorched wastelands of the asteroid-battered Earth. Defeating these guys and their leader, General Cross, is your primary motivation in

The combat is the black, beating heart of the game

Rage 2 – not to mention gangs of raiders, bandits, and other goons. But honestly, the story is entirely forgettable. The combat is the black, beating heart of the game, and the reason you'll keep playing long after you've stopped caring about the plot.

Rage 2 is a magnificent first-person shooter, but brutal, tactile weapons like the shotgun are just one piece of the puzzle.

As you locate and crack open more Arks, which are found scattered around the open world, you unlock forgotten fragments of technology which grant you what are, essentially, superpowers. Some of these are pretty understated, such as a gravity-defying double jump or the ability to float in mid-air for a few seconds while aiming your weapon. But others are much more dramatic.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An open world post-apocalyptic shooter

EXPECT TO PAY
£40

DEVELOPER
Avalanche, id Software

PUBLISHER
Bethesda

REVIEWED ON
GTX 1080, Intel i5-6600K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
www.rage2.com

DROP SHOT

Slam is my favourite of the lot. Activate it when you're above a group of enemies and you'll unleash a concussive blast when you hit the ground. Anyone in the impact zone is turned into a bloody paste, the others tossed into the air like gruesome ragdolls. And the higher up you are when you use it, the more devastating the discharge. *Rage 2* is a game where you frequently find yourself swarmed and overwhelmed by fast-moving enemies, making Slam an effective means of crowd control.

Cause enough mayhem and you can hit the V key to activate Overdrive mode, which makes your weapons more powerful, regenerates health, and reduces the cooldown time of your powers. You can also conjure up protective energy shields and drag groups of enemies together by tossing a swirling vortex into the battlefield. And all of these abilities – and pretty much everything in the game, including weapons and vehicles – have their own upgrade trees. There's a huge amount of customisation in *Rage 2*, offering countless ways to deal with any given combat situation.

Other powers include Shatter, which lets you charge rapidly towards an enemy with a surge of power, smashing their armour to pieces or, if they're close enough,

JOB LOT Things to do in the open world



ARKS

These high-tech remnants from the pre-cataclysm world are a constant source of amazing tech and powers. But only Rangers can open them, which means you get to keep the spoils for yourself.



AUTHORITY SENTRIES

These giant robotic laser cannons are extremely powerful, but you can take 'em down if you're tenacious enough. Doing so will make the wasteland safer and give you Feltrite to upgrade your skills.



MUTIE NESTS

'Mutie' is the wasteland nickname for, you guessed it, mutants. These mindless, snarling, zombie-like beasts live in these gross nests, and destroying them will make the region a lot safer.



CONVOYS

As you drive around the wasteland you'll see convoys of enemy vehicles, which looks like something out of Mad Max. You can leave them be, of course, but it's much more fun to engage in some car combat.



BANDIT DENS

Bandits are a constant nuisance in the wasteland, and you can rarely walk or drive a mile before being harassed by them. They hang out in these camps, and clearing one out is a good way to weaken their forces.



PIT STOPS

Bandits and roving gangs need to keep their vehicles fuelled and repaired, which is where these pit stops come in. When it comes to destroying them, all those fuel tanks come in handy, for obvious reasons.

A town hidden
in a swamp.



The wasteland is
far from desolate.



Nothing weird
about this.



ROUND CONTROL

the Authority intruders

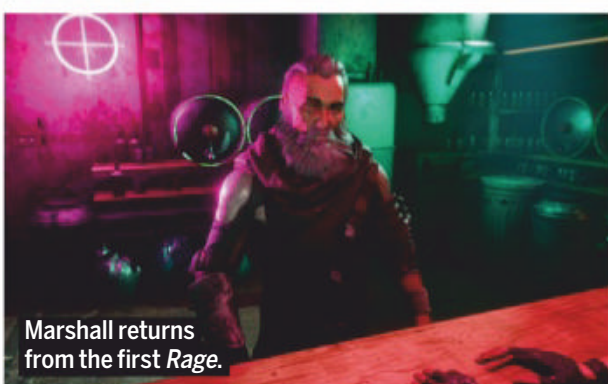
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CYBER CRUSHER

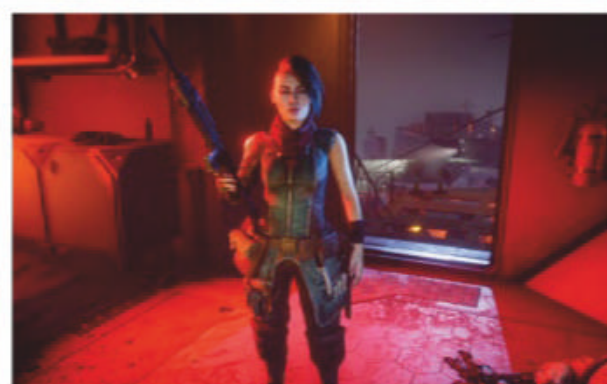
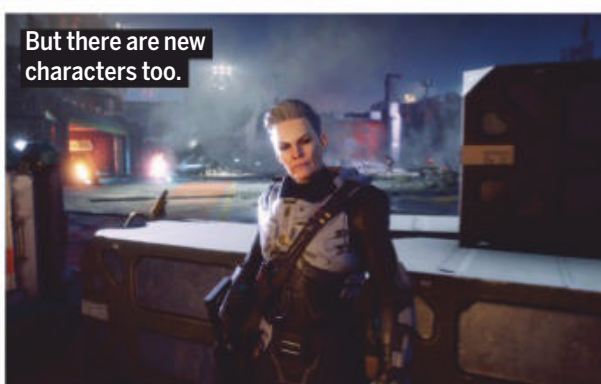


Some enemies are
very *Doom*-like.

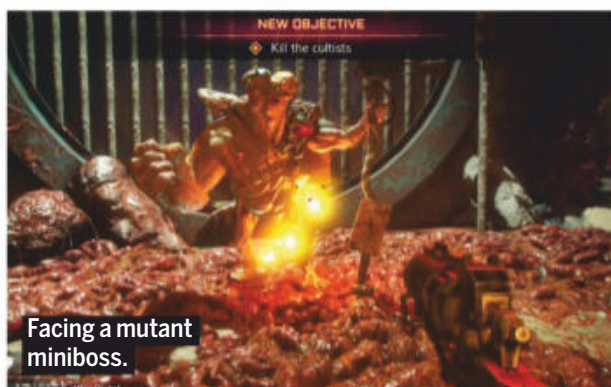
Marshall returns
from the first *Rage*.



But there are new
characters too.



One of the preposterous vehicles on offer.



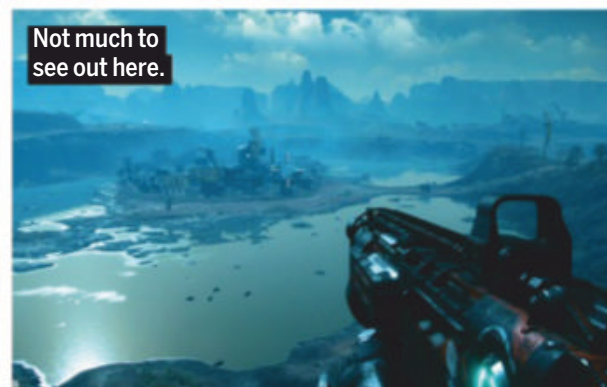
Facing a mutant miniboss.



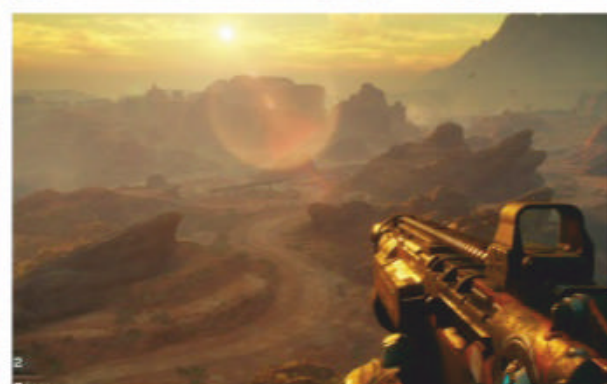
Loosum Hagar is all grown up.



The intro sequence is dramatic.



Not much to see out here.



» exploding them in a mist of claret. Over the course of the game your powers, weapons, and upgrades stack up, and the combat becomes exponentially more fun in the process. If you loved the precision, brutality, and fluidity of the *Doom* reboot id Software released in 2016, but wished it had more variety, *Rage 2* is the answer to your dark prayers.

Curiously, however, the default key bindings for your powers are incredibly clumsy. You have to hold down the control key, then press another key to activate them. That might not sound too complicated, but in the midst of a frenetic, fast-paced firefight, when you're also trying to run and jump and shoot, it feels like you're wrestling with your fingers.

Luckily you can rebind your powers, and I found assigning them to the number keys felt much more intuitive. It's clear *Rage 2*'s UI has been optimised for a gamepad, because even menu navigation feels a little awkward with the mouse.

DEAD WORLD

So we've established that the shooting is exceptional, but what about the rest of the game? Well, unfortunately, nothing else here manages to reach the high watermark set by the combat.

The world is a consistent disappointment, being a surprisingly drab, uninspiring place. Co-developer Avalanche created a beautiful, haunting post-apocalyptic wasteland for its take on *Mad Max* in 2015, but this dreary expanse of swampy forests, rocky valleys, and dusty dunes is deeply uninspiring. Much of the game is spent driving between missions, which only heightens the lack of visual interest.

A lush jungle region to the north, The Wilds, is the most interesting in terms of visuals and atmosphere – if only because it's so different from the rest of the game. And I do like how *Rage 2*'s world is relatively small, especially compared to other Avalanche games. It feels like a more curated, considered space, rather than an endless, empty sprawl.

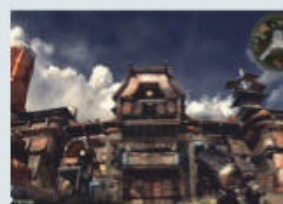
The fidelity of the world-building isn't quite enough to make exploration very rewarding and the open world feels more like a means

LINK TO THE PAST *How Rage 2 connects with the original*



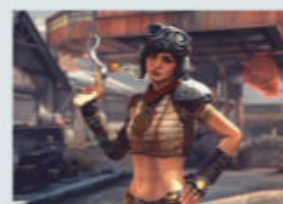
ARKS

The protagonist emerges from one of these shelters in the original game. They're important in the sequel too, granting Walker high-tech pre-cataclysm weapons and abilities that are basically superpowers.



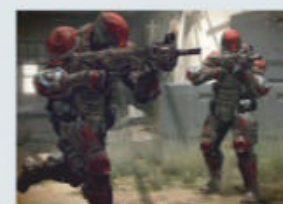
WELLSPRING

This is the first major town you visit in the original game, and it still exists in *Rage 2*. However, the city is now much bigger, with a larger population and holographic advertising billboards clinging to every surface.



LOOSUM HAGAR

Loosum, daughter of John Goodman-voiced Dan Hagar, teaches the protagonist how to use wingsticks in the original game. In the sequel she's the mayor of Wellspring and is, once again, an important ally.



THE AUTHORITY

The villains of the original game. They were defeated by the protagonist, but their commander, General Cross, is back in *Rage 2*, having kept himself alive by augmenting what's left of his body with cybernetic implants.

of getting you from one mission to another, rather than an intrinsic part of the experience. An open world should compel you to go off-road and explore, but I never felt much of an urge to break away from the route given by the GPS.

The vehicle handling is another sore point – especially if you happen to be playing with a mouse and keyboard. Your main ride is the Phoenix, a chunky little APC with a couple of loud, rattly machine-guns strapped to the front. You can also drive other vehicles you find (or

steal) in the world and, if you've unlocked a specific upgrade, drive them back to settlements such as towns and cities to add them to your collection.

The problem is, they all feel pretty

horrible to drive. The handling is sluggish, smeary, and unresponsive, and you never feel like you're fully in control behind the wheel.

Driving is a little more enjoyable if you switch to a gamepad with an analogue stick, but the overly wide turning circle many of the cars seem to have makes you feel like you have to fight to get them around a corner sometimes. It's a peculiar, strangely isolated dip in quality, because pretty much everything else in *Rage 2* feels amazing: from the exciting little knee-slide you can transition into if you crouch while sprinting, to something as simple as smashing an ammo

crate open. I can't remember the last game I played where I enjoyed breaking things open so much.

GOOD FEELING

Rage 2 is one of the most satisfyingly slick, crunchy first-person games I've played in a while, which extends to everything from the punchy visual feedback of your powers to basic navigation such as jumping and mantling. Artistically, however, it stumbles. The game suffers from a distinct lack of personality, with a lifeless world that looks like a dozen other dusty wastelands, edgy humour that almost always falls flat, and a dumb, shallow storyline straight out of a bad Saturday morning cartoon. No amount of adolescent swearing or hot pink spray paint can change the fact that *Rage 2* is actually about as punk as a Michael McDonald album.

But in the heat of the moment, besieged by enemies, chaining powers and firing those thunderous guns, I forget about *Rage 2*'s bland world and story. The combat is a powerful distraction from the game's problems – at least until the gunfire stops. There's a lot to love here, but the gulf in quality between the combat and just about everything else is ultimately harmful to the overall experience. Despite those issues, though, Avalanche and id Software can still be proud of the fact that *Rage 2*'s shotgun has to be one of the best in the business. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Some of the best first-person shooting on PC, but the rest of the game struggles to keep up with it.

70



CONSTRUCTION KIT

RISE OF INDUSTRY is a beautiful but aimless sandbox. *By Tom Hatfield*

The first thing you'll notice upon playing *Rise of Industry* is that it's absolutely gorgeous. The boxy shapes and flat colours of the low-poly style are a perfect fit for the city/factory builder genre. This, combined with bright colours and sticker-like icons, makes the game looks less like a real city and more like a child's play set. Unfortunately that's also how the game plays, like a toy. Something that's fun to play with, but lacks direction.

Rise of Industry is fundamentally about supply and demand. There are a handful of towns of various sizes spread across the map, each of which has two to four stores which will buy a certain good. Your job is to fulfil that demand. This can be as simple as mining some coal and shipping it directly to the hardware store, or as complicated as the pizza, a puzzle of a product that requires mills producing flour, vegetable farms and a dairy producing cheese.

A great deal of thought has gone into refining all of these interactions. Buildings thunk down satisfyingly, trucks chug along adorably and even the menu buttons click pleasingly. Clearly a lot of effort has been put into ensuring that the game feels fundamentally pleasing to play.

I said the game looks gorgeous, and this extends to a simple but

elegant UI. I was particularly a fan of the little bubbles that pop up to show what product a building is producing and how far along it is. This, along with other icons make it easy to diagnose problems like disconnected

roads or too many products in storage. In addition to this helpful UI, the game pushes you toward useful outside sources of information, with links to both the wiki and a helpful YouTube tutorial right there on

the start menu.

Eventually things get a little bit more complicated, with the player getting access to heavier trucks, trains, boats and even zeppelins to haul products and set up long distance supply chains across the map. The only problem here is I didn't feel enormous pressure to use them. You see, resources are spread so evenly across the map it seems just

I'm mostly doing it because mutton zeppelins are cool

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Minimalist factory builder

EXPECT TO PAY
£20

DEVELOPER
Dapper Penguin

PUBLISHER
Kasedo Games

REVIEWED ON
Intel i5, 16gb RAM, Nvidia GTX 970

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
www.riseofindustry.com

as easy to build a new manufacturing facility near your destination as it is to set up railway line. Perhaps someone better at capitalism than me can point out how much I'd be shaving off my margins delivering my mutton by zeppelin, but at the moment I'm mostly doing it because mutton zeppelins are cool.

It doesn't help that the "campaign" is what I would usually consider a sandbox mode, while the actual "sandbox" is just the same thing but with infinite money and everything unlocked. There are AI competitors, but they don't seem to add much beyond being a nuisance when they buy exclusive rights to build in an area I was targeting. There's no real ability to undercut your competition by offering a cheaper product or better marketing, instead the different corporations mostly stay out of each other's way so that everyone can keep making money, in exactly the way capitalism isn't supposed to work, but does.

CAPITALISM

How much you'll enjoy *Rise of Industry* is largely going to depend on how capable you are of making your own fun. The interactions are very strong, but the only goal the developers offer is creating an endgame product (a car, a computer or a ready meal). There's no real capacity for expression and creativity either, one supply chain looks much like another, and the player is chasing efficiency, not aesthetics.

I got a good few hours of fun out of *Rise of Industry*, but ultimately once that time had passed I found I simply wasn't interested in creating a slightly more profitable brick factory than my last one, perhaps I'm simply not enough of a capitalist. ■

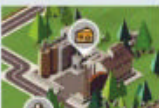
PC GAMER VERDICT

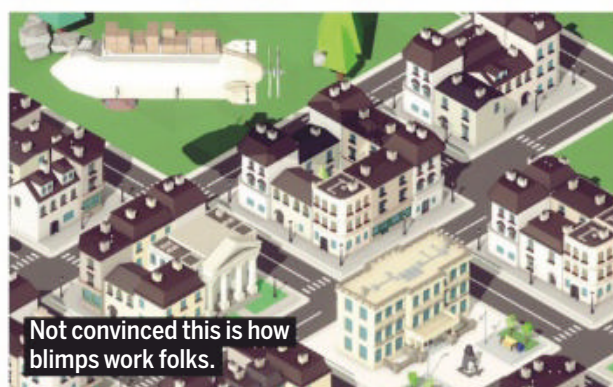
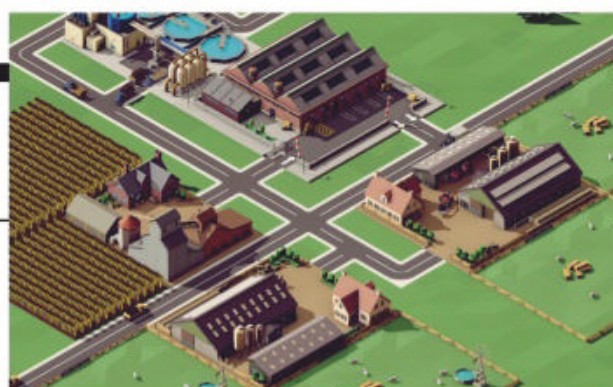
Beautiful style, polished interactions, but ultimately it just runs out of things to do after a while

72

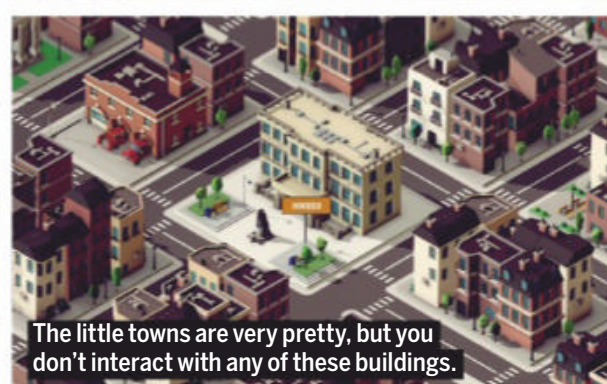
PIZZA PARTY

How to assemble a tier 3 food

 COW This cattle ranch produces milk for the cheese.	 WHEAT Cows need wheat to eat, and we also need it for flour.	 FLOUR This mill grinds the wheat you've grown into flour.	 DOUGH I don't know why I need a whole factory to add water to flour.	 VEGETABLES The simplest step, a topping. No pineapple allowed.
 WATER This keeps our crops watered and our cows hydrated.	 CHEESE Milk from the cows goes in here to get turned into cheese.	 PIZZA The final, hopefully delicious, product comes from here!	 WAREHOUSE The warehouse sucks in resources and dishes them out.	 ZEPPELIN FIELD We're delivering our pizzas by blimp, because why not?



Not convinced this is how blimps work folks.



SPELLBOUND

Be prepared to spend plenty of time in the unusual, uncompromising **OUTWARD**. By Chris Livingston

A game where you can never die sounds like it'd make you fearless. Why worry about failure when you simply fall unconscious and wake up somewhere else? It turns out the opposite is true in. Failure costs something more precious than a videogame life – it costs time. Time to heal, to rest, to repair gear, to travel all the way back to the site of your defeat to try, and possibly to fail, again. Immortality is more terrifying than death.

You can't just reload your last save when you lose a fight, because *Outward* constantly auto-saves your progress. Every lengthy trip across the map (there's no fast-travel or mounts), every purchase at a vendor or skill upgrade at a trainer, every decision in a questline, and every single fight, is an event that needs to be very carefully considered and prepared for. The auto-save and never-die principles of *Outward* are harsh, and feel punishing at times, but beyond making your failures meaningful they also make triumphs monumental.

Combine this with enjoyable survival elements and a brilliant magic system, and *Outward* becomes a rare gem. It's got plenty of rough edges, but it's an RPG where traditionally mundane tasks become complicated, where normally simple decisions become weighty, and where it feels like every single choice you make really matters. I love this game.

I also, sometimes, hate this game. Honestly, most of my stories in *Outward* are of failure. The time I spied a bandit in the distance and laid out several tripwire traps only to discover it was a bandit wizard who

then knocked me unconscious from range with ice magic, never even getting near all my traps. The time I took off my bulky backpack to allow myself greater mobility in a fight only to realise I'd left my magic book

inside it, and thus couldn't cast any of the rune spells I'd just learned. The time I walked into a castle and chatted with a chieftain who was perfectly friendly until he stripped me of my belongings and threw me into his dungeon.

I even failed my very first quest. It seemed simple: earn 150 silver coins to buy back my house (a lighthouse, in fact), which had been repossessed by my town's leaders to repay a debt I owed. I set out to recover an unusual mushroom from a cave, hoping it'd

He stripped me of my belongings and threw me into his dungeon

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A fantasy RPG with survival elements

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Nine Dots Studio

PUBLISHER
Deep Silver

REVIEWED ON
GTX 980, Intel i5-6600K, 8 GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Online and local co-op

LINK
www.ninedotsstudio.com

fetch a nice price from a collector, but along the way I lost a fight to two bandits, who dragged my body back to their fort. I managed to find my gear, escape, and heal myself, but I stepped into a spike trap and lost consciousness again. This time I was dragged to safety by a mysterious benefactor, but I woke up on the far side of the map. By the time I made it back home – which took me through a fort filled with angry ghosts I was in no way prepared to handle – it was days later, and the time-sensitive quest to buy my house had expired. Now I owed 300 silver. It was nearly a week later before I had a proper bed to sleep in.

In any other RPG I probably would have just reloaded my last save and avoided most of those headaches. But while I didn't enjoy everything about the difficult trip back home, it's now a part of my character's long and troubled history of devastating failures and eventual successes.

ONWARDS AND...

There are downsides to *Outward*'s systems, too. One quest sent me searching for a hideout (bandits again) and owing to *Outward* having no quest arrows and not displaying your own location on the map, it took quite a lot of running around and searching based only on the vague directions I was given. While exploring an area on some cliffs, I slid down an incline and got stuck between the cliff and a rock wall. I couldn't wiggle free and remained trapped in the sliding animation. Since you can't fast travel or reload a save, there I stayed, for two real hours, hoping I'd eventually slip into unconsciousness from lack of food or drink or sleep.

It never happened. My meters all ran down to zero, only resulting in debuffs for my stamina. Even contracting a disease from exposure (I took off my clothing when it began to rain) didn't knock me out. I eventually had to go into the game files and delete my last several

BACKPACK EVOLUTION

Celebrating Outward's various and wonderful backpacks



GLOWSTONE BACKPACK
It provides its own light, so you don't need a lantern.



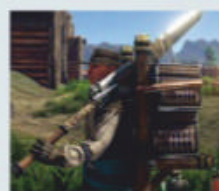
SCALED BACKPACK
Craftable, roomy, and doesn't slow your dodging down.



PRESERVATION BACKPACK
Like an minifridge on your back, it keeps food fresh.



BRASS WOLF
Also provides armour, plus it's a grinning brass wolf. Very metal.

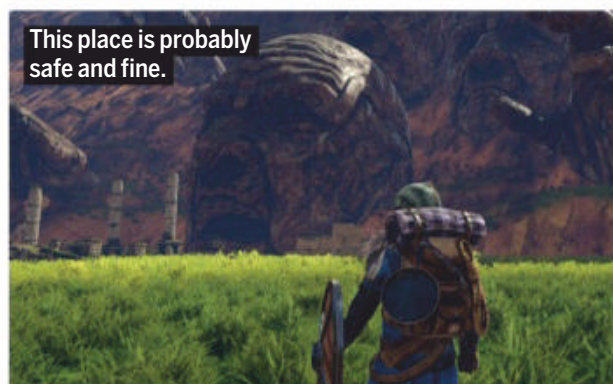


MEFINO'S TRADE BACKPACK
Ridiculously big. Too big, probably.

Magic landmines blast enemies before they reach you.



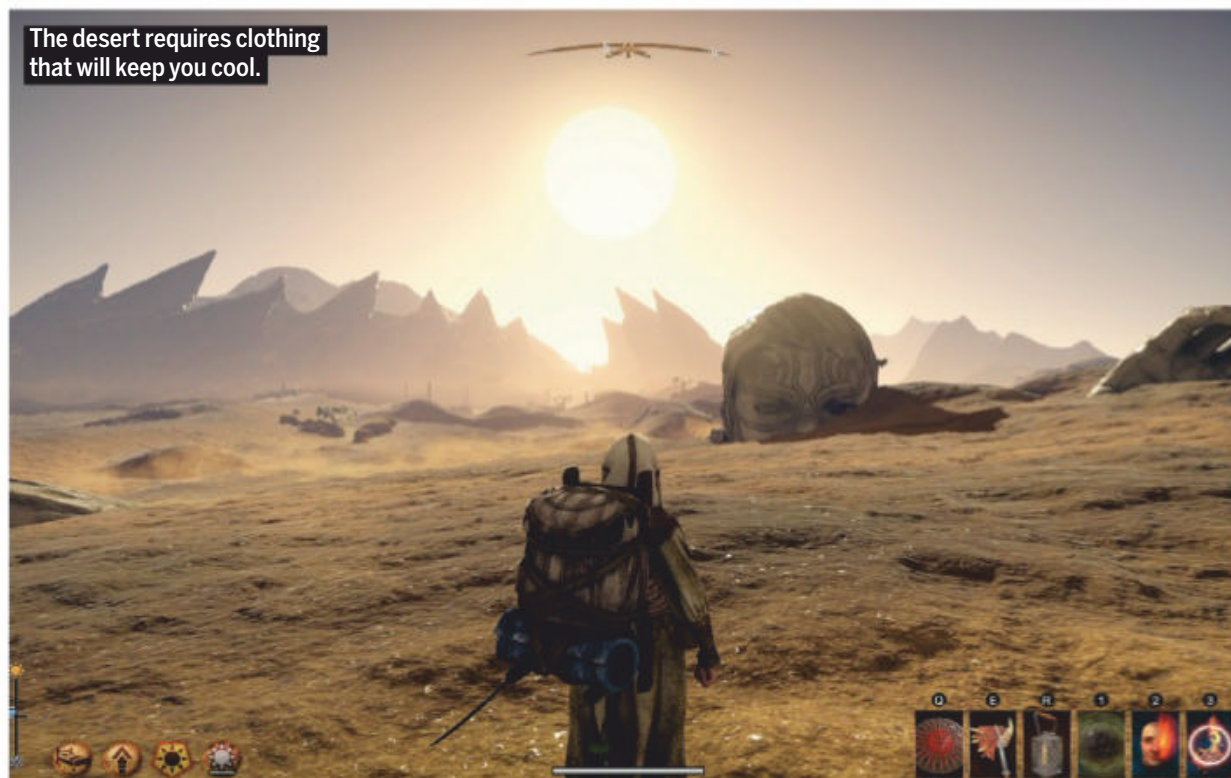
This place is probably safe and fine.



I have hat envy.



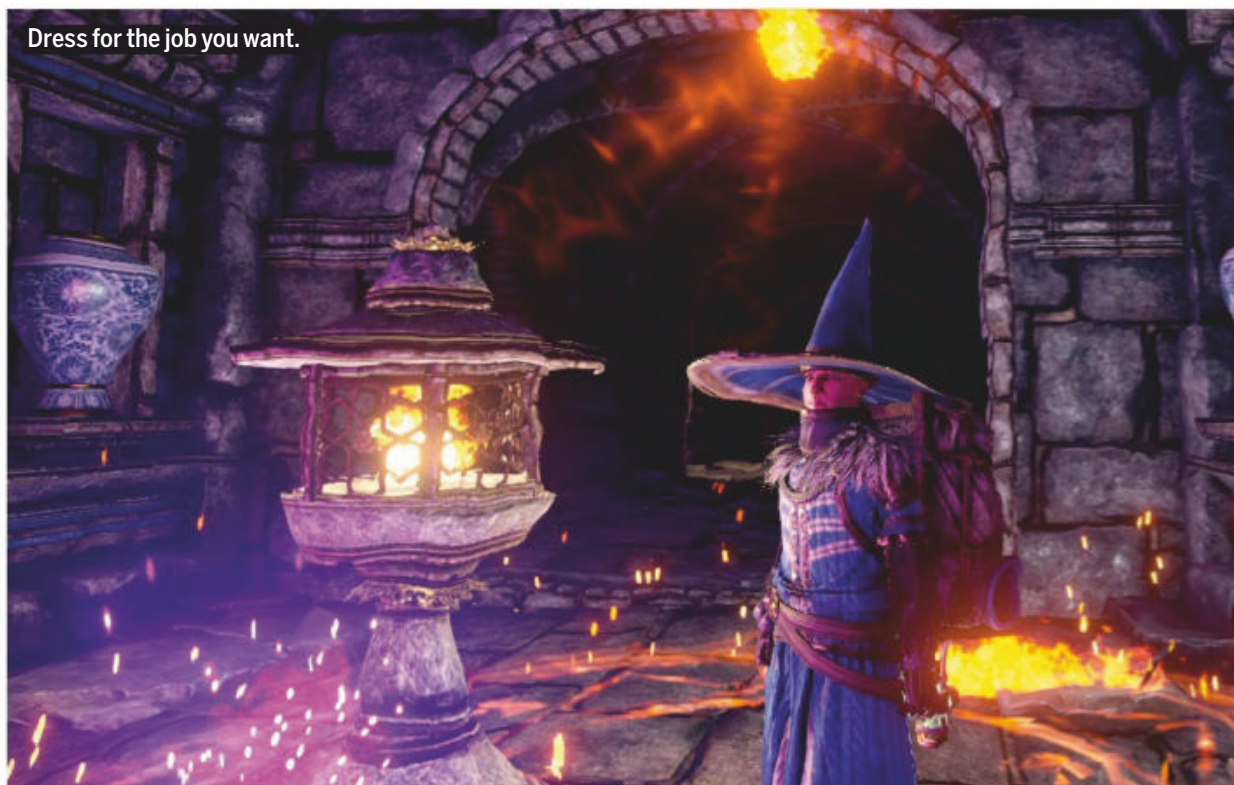
The desert requires clothing that will keep you cool.



I hope that thing isn't going to get up.



Dress for the job you want.



Looks silly, but this bird mask gives you a major speed buff.

The cold will sap your endurance, so keep warm.



This shipwreck has some treasure, and a riddle.



THE JOY OF CAMPING

Tips for getting some R&R

1 SLEEP LIKE A KING

Buy a tent so you'll sleep like a king even on the ground.

2 BUY WISELY

Tents provide different bonuses. Fur tents keep you warm, mage tents boost your mana.

3 FIND A SAFE SPOT

If you pitch your tent near butterflies, it's an ambush-free zone.



4 CHOW DOWN

Camping is a great time to cook any raw meat or plants you've collected.

5 TAKE TIME TO FIX YOUR GEAR

Allocate a few hours of rest for repairing weapons and armour.

6 PLANT YOURSELF

The plant tent is a big seed that instantly grows into a single-use tent.

7 DISASSEMBLE

Don't forget to roll up your tent and take it with you in the morning!

» autosaves, which put me back at the start of my journey to the hideout. I don't mind losing time from a defeat in *Outward*, but losing real world hours from getting stuck on some world geometry was very frustrating.

Magic in *Outward* involves more complexity than just keeping a mana meter filled. The fireball spell, a staple of fantasy games, is essentially like throwing a lit match at someone. It's weak unless it's cast while standing in a magic circle, which is another spell that requires physical components that need to be collected and sometimes even crafted. Once the circle is cast, the fireball becomes explosive and deadly, and the preparation required to unleash it at its fullest turns it from just a reflexive keypress into a satisfying sequence.

Spells and skills can also be used in conjunction with one another – I can cast a Warm Boon spell that allows me to cast a second spell which infuses my weapon with flames for extra damage, and then use a Gong Strike ability to bash my burning weapon against my metal shield, letting loose a shockwave of flames. Learning these skills and combos and putting them to use makes the magic feel almost like science. Like something that has real rules and procedures. Spells aren't all-powerful, but it still feels like you're doing something powerful when you master them.

Like everything else in *Outward*, magic has a cost. Gaining the ability to cast your first wimpy fireball requires first fighting your way to the centre of a mountain, and then permanently sacrificing a portion of your physical health and stamina in

an arcane ritual. The more powerful you want your magic to be, the weaker you'll be physically.

There's not a massive open world in *Outward*, but winding dungeons, hidden caves, and the relatively slow pace of travel across the four regions makes it feel bigger than it is, especially when you're just starting out. While cities are full of NPCs, there are typically only a few to talk to, pretty much just the quest-givers and merchants.

There also aren't a huge number of different enemy types in the world, and once killed they'll remain dead for days, so retracing your steps across the four regions of *Outward*

can occasionally be completely uneventful. The main quest I finished for one of the three factions wasn't terribly long, though combined with side-quests, frequent setbacks and my hesitant exploration of

the world, it took me roughly 50 hours to complete.

I'm ready to make a new character and play another 50 hours. Unlike games such as *Oblivion* or *Skyrim*, where a single character can climb to the top of every guild or completely unlock every skill tree to become a living god, you'll need multiple characters in *Outward* to explore every possibility available. You're restricted from advancing through every skill tree (there are eight in total, and you can unlock the upper tiers of only three with the same character). This is yet another instance of your choices being weighty ones – I spent hours making multiple visits to several skill trainers, hemming and hawing, before finally deciding on which

trees to follow. It also opens the door to future playthroughs where you'll experience the world in a different way with a different set of abilities.

CO-OP TEAM UP

You don't need to brave the harsh world of *Outward* alone – co-op play is available, either online or locally with split-screen, and adventuring with a friend is supremely fun (not to mention rare for a singleplayer fantasy RPG). There's a big flaw in co-op, in that only the person hosting the game will gain quest progress, but I still had a great time playing a few hours in co-op as we explored, fought, fled, divided up loot, camped out under the stars, and occasionally ran into our own failures.

Outward's unusual design provides a different experience than I've found in most RPGs. It completely breaks the common habits of fast-travelling, gaining a fortune in loot, becoming an all-powerful god, and reloading saved games when things don't go as planned or you make a choice you regret. It makes minor setbacks feel like major obstacles to overcome and it makes small victories feel like utter triumphs. *Outward* is harsh and frustrating, but it does what so few games do. It requires you to put real thought into the choices you make, and it makes those choices feel like they really matter. Most of all, it makes you approach each and every encounter as if your life depended on it – even though you never die. ■

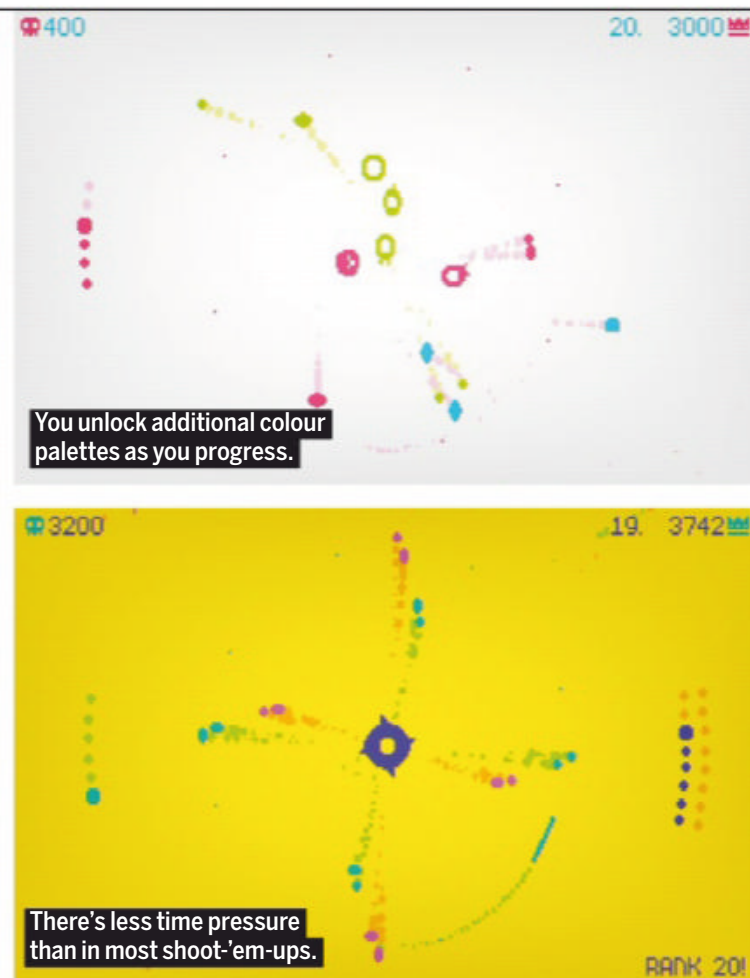
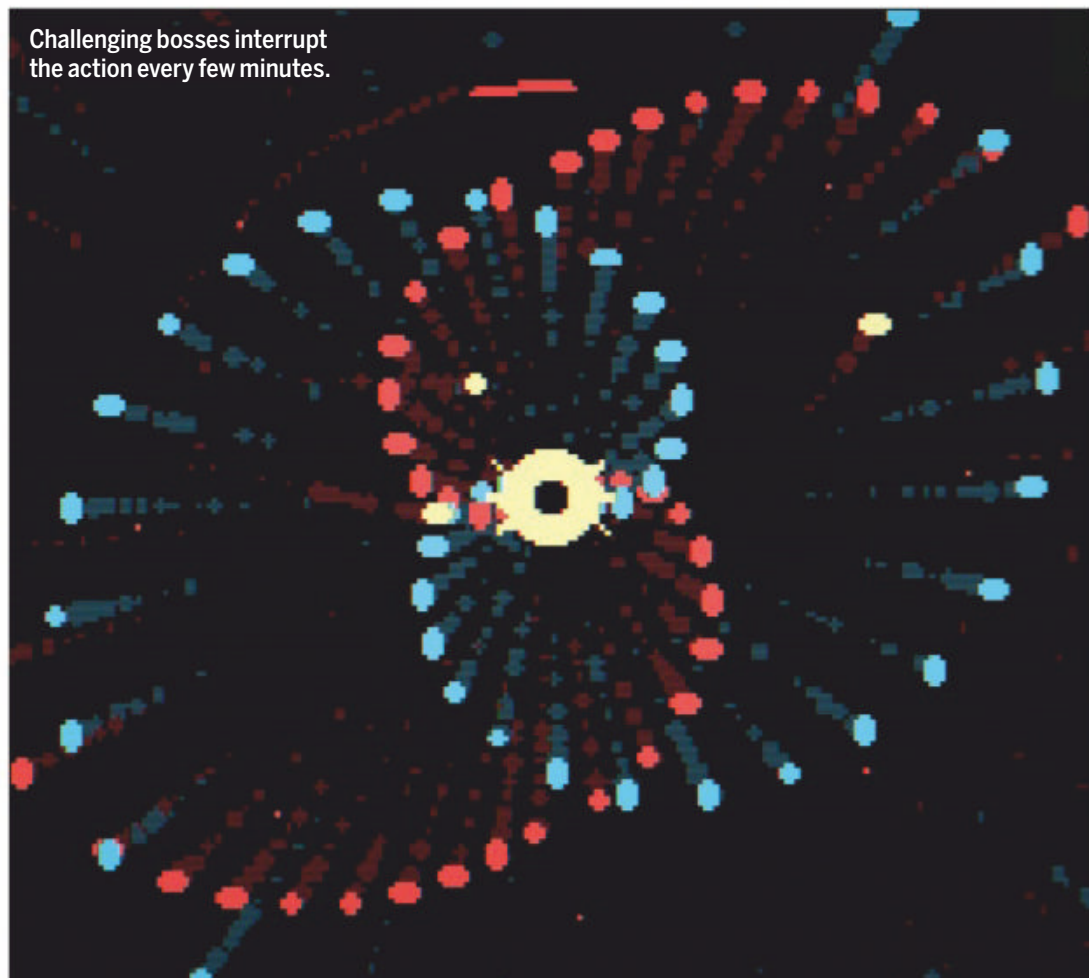


PC GAMER VERDICT

A few rough edges don't stop *Outward* from being a gem. Its nature makes even a tiny amount of progress feel meaningful.

89

Breaker



BIG BREAK

You break it, you don't pay for it in **BREAKER**. By Tom Sykes

If I told you that *Breaker* was inspired by *Ikaruga*, you'd probably imagine a vertically scrolling shoot-'em-up where you can absorb enemy bullets by changing colour. Similarly, if I said it was inspired by *Breakout*, you'd reasonably expect to be breaking blocks by reflecting a digital ball. *Breaker* is inspired by both of those beloved arcade classics as well as, more generally, *Space Invaders*, but in the intermingling it feels like something thrillingly new.

As in *Breakout*, you play as a sort of featureless paddle-thing here, without the ability to fire your own bullets. Instead, you have to repel enemy spaceships' projectiles back at them, as you rotate around a circular playing field. Even without the devious colour twist, *Breaker* would be a satisfying shoot-'em-up, with fluid, kinetic pixel art, and one of the best soundtracks I've heard all year. Just as the stages blend seamlessly into one another, the catchy chiptune music is always either building or contracting, to perfectly reflect the state of the on-screen action.

As bullet-hell-style games go, this is also one of the more approachable, peppering the screen with only handfuls of bullets at a time, while giving you plenty of empty space with which to manoeuvre yourself

out of trouble. You can absorb a few hits before the Game Over screen appears, and you'll even recover a bit of health after defeating bosses. However, as with *Ikaruga*, there's another layer to the action that you have to keep in mind with every tap you make on the left and right cursor keys.

I find this engrossing arcade game far easier to process

Enemies, and their bullets, are generally either red or blue in *Breaker*. When you move the paddle to the left/clockwise, it turns blue, and can therefore repel blue projectiles back towards your attackers. But when you move in an anti-clockwise fashion, the paddle turns red, and suddenly red bullets are your friends. Bullets of the opposite colour are harmful to you, of course. However, when you dodge out of their way, you may find that you've changed hue as a result.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A bullet-hell-ish arcade game where you change colour every time you move

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Daniel Linssen

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
AMD A4-6300@3.7GHz, 6GB RAM, GeForce GT 610

MULTIPLAYER
None

LINK
bit.ly/BreakerGame

Every tap of left or right is therefore a tactical decision, not to be taken lightly. It's a lot to take in, but the action isn't so fast or so hectic that you need the reflexes of a ninja. During the first few stages, at least.

NEU-ARKANOID

I can't get my head around *Ikaruga*. I find it difficult enough just dodging bullets, without having to remember to switch colour at the touch of a button. But, perhaps because that change is handled automatically in *Breaker*, I find this engrossing arcade game far easier to process. I slipped into its rhythm, into its 'flow' remarkably smoothly, although I did eventually get slightly bored of fighting the same bosses, in the same order, during each replay.

I think the developer is being modest in declaring its inspirations, as *Breaker* is hardly a clone of the classics I mentioned. It can stand proudly next to the formative shoot-'em-ups that influenced it. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

An absorbing arcade game with an inspired premise, and a great soundtrack. You'll want to replay. And replay.

87

MAZE GONE

It's a scream in **PENUMBRA**. *By Tom Sykes*

Penumbra confusingly shares a name, and a genre, with Frictional Games' *Penumbra* series, so be sure to include the developer, Adam Kehl, in your Google search. It's a horrific puzzle game that will have you stroking your chin one moment, and jumping in fright the next – an inspired combination, if not an especially palatable one.

The story's enjoyably mysterious. You wake up at a snowy dig site housing an ominous, 2001-style monolith. Like all the best monuments, this one's rich in mystical energy, transporting you to a surreal realm full of spatial puzzles and supernatural creatures. But the puzzles are well-implemented, and fairly original, comprising a series of deceptive environments that have to be traversed in a very specific manner. Think *Antichamber* and

you're in the right ballpark, but with a dash of the hedge maze too.

If it sounds like a delightful puzzler that you could happily lose yourself in, that's because I haven't mentioned the spider yet. There's a *giant spider* in one area that serves as *Penumbra*'s minotaur, a skittering arachnid that scampers about while you fathom a difficult maze. If it gets you, you're thrown back to the entrance, and you just had to endure the most horrible sound.

I don't know about you, but that's a level of pressure that I don't find terribly conducive to the puzzling process – although admittedly it does transform a basic maze into a deadly game of cat and mouse. I'm not convinced 'horror' and 'puzzles' are two words that look good together, but it did feel novel using my brain, even when a massive spider was doing its best to ensure I didn't. ■

59



It's a nice-looking game, with thoughtfully strange environments.



Contact with an enemy will put you back a short distance.

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Adam Kehl

PUBLISHER
In-house

HOLE NEW WORLD

Feeling blue with **ESCAPED CHASM**. *By Tom Sykes*

Here's a short, sad game from *Undertale* artist Temmie Chang (with lovely music by Toby Fox, to boot). You play as an unnamed girl who has developed a fear of leaving the house, an inconvenient phobia to have when both of her parents have gone missing, and strange things have started happening inside her home. For one thing, a mysterious traveller has appeared, spouting cryptic messages about her mum and dad. For another, her house appears to reside inside a gradually collapsing void. To put things right she'll need to make a terrible choice, with no real clue what the repercussions might be.

In its atmosphere, this short, story-focused game reminded me of *Yume Nikki*, but with a more concrete narrative, and a far stronger sense of melancholy. There's sadness

everywhere, from the distinctly blue colour palette, to the mournful soundtrack, and the girl's almost heartbreaking interactions with her environment. You examine her pet snake, and of course it's nearly dead. You look at pictures of her parents, who left her all alone. The TV, with its daily snippets of cartoons, is really her only friend here. But balancing the melancholy is the heroine herself, who retains a hint of hope even though her world is going to hell.

I found the story a little affecting thanks to the well-observed dialogue, and the expressive pixel art, which depicts a lonely, confused girl who'd rather live inside her dreams. You'll desperately want to get her out of the house, even if you have no idea where she'll end up. The multiple endings – for all their mysteriousness – do deliver, in a pretty cathartic way, on that. ■

81



The girl is, frankly, adorable.

Sure it's in a void, but have you seen non-void house prices lately?

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Temie Chang

PUBLISHER
In-house

This is why the teachers warned you not to lean back in your chair.



OIL BE GONE

Cowering in the shadows in **AMNESIA: THE DARK DESCENT**

Let's be picky. The central conceit of *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* is unrealistic. As anyone who's taken a first date to see a Lars Von Trier film can attest, it's impossible to forget your worst mistakes. So the idea that someone could blithely erase out a past containing torture, kidnapping, and murder seems harder to swallow than than one of the game's potions.

The obvious caveat? It doesn't matter. *Amnesia* remains a gruelling, unique experience. The sort of horror game that's difficult to play, not because the puzzles are tricky or it's technically challenging, but because it's *horrid*. I played it on a bright Sunday afternoon and it was still frightening enough to have me jumping at every creak, moan, and distant footstep.

The first thing I learn about myself is that despite being the bravest person writing this feature, I'm afraid of the dark when monsters, the threat of monsters, or the vaguest hint at the possibility of monsters is involved. Light sources are finite in *Amnesia*. A sensible player will ration them. But I use up all my tinderboxes lighting every torch I can, like a timid child home alone at grandma's on a stormy night. I've decided I'm actually playing *Amnesia: Relax with Scented*

It gets worse as the game gets darker and my sanity suffers

Candles. But then I run out of lamp oil scrabbling about for more tinder. It's embarrassing, but it's also a great example of why *Amnesia* still works. It can do more with a single shadowy alcove than Shinji Mikami can do with an asylum entirely built out of hammered brains.

A couple of things heighten my newfound infantile fear of dark places. Firstly, there's the sound design. Moans echo down every corridor, and constant scratching makes me feel like I've

got a spider dancing in my ear canal. It gets worse as the game gets darker and my sanity suffers – an effective, gnawing way of saying “turn on your lamp, you cretin”. And then there's how *tactile* everything is. I have to pull open rusty doors, manipulate fallen rocks, and explore creaking cupboards. The fact that I'm physically interacting with these

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A Lovecraftian candle-lighting misery simulator

EXPECT TO PAY
£15

DEVELOPER
Frictional Games

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CPU
@ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM,
NVIDIA GeForce GTX
1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
www.steampowered.com

things draws me in, and every time I open a door and discover the blackness beyond, I'm tempted to edge back into whichever well-lit room I'm about to leave. It also makes me wish that more games let me interact with stuff like this – preferably games with less terror. Let me arrange flowers on a butterfly farm or order socks in a Marie Kondo simulator. Anything but this.

FEAR FACTOR

So it's horrible, but in exactly the right way. I enjoy being this scared. The only thing I don't love are the flashbacks that break the pace of the game. They're a means of exposition, but the laws of relativity state that I can't be scared in two existences at once. If anything, the temporal shifts feel like a reprieve from the danger of the present. *Amnesia* is best when the horrors are woven seamlessly into the exploration like satanic crochet – and then, it's so horrible that I want to curl up into a ball and have a cry. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Tactile, imaginative, and unsettling – nine years since release, and *Amnesia* is still almost too scary to play.

81

REINVESTIGATION

Fedoras, flames, and facetiousness in **UNAVOWED**

You know what it's like when you go into your favourite bar, everyone cheers, and the landlord has poured your usual tippie by the time you've reached your stool? No, me neither. But I imagine it's a lot like going back to *Unavowed*. There's something about the pacing of Dave Gilbert's supernatural mystery that's deeply comforting. I can meander through a case in a single evening, meet some new people and spend time with characters who feel like they existed before I started playing. Compared to the noise and bluster of other games, *Unavowed* feels dark, real, and oddly relaxing.

That doesn't mean it's nice. Each story feels like a cautionary fairytale. I solve a case that begins with a man burning himself alive for the sake of creativity and ends with me sticking a scimitar through an elderly art

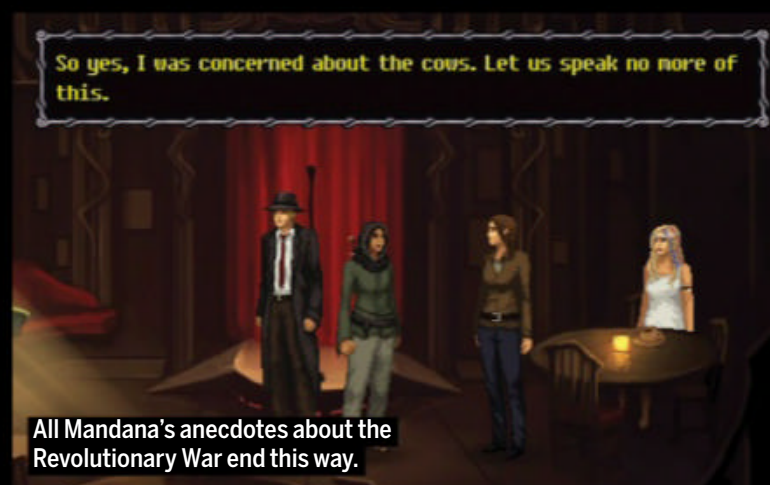
teacher, like elegant, delayed revenge for high school batik classes.

But that's a reductive way of talking about *Unavowed*, a game all about small details. It does a magical job of rendering the hidden spaces underneath New York's glittering towers, making everything feel intimate and important. And it even sounds lovely. The compression on the VO is like listening to old vinyl, and a soft jazzy soundtrack plays over perpetual, pattering rain.

Perhaps my favourite thing about *Unavowed* is how it takes clichéd elements and makes them feel engaging again. My amnesiac hero feels relatable and I love that I can solve problems with my actor powers. *Unavowed* might be the only game that manages to make a man wearing a fedora tolerable.

A smart, understated, thoroughly modern adventure game. ■

84



All Mandana's anecdotes about the Revolutionary War end this way.



And with that, I found my new Tinder bio.

NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£11

DEVELOPER
Wadjet Eye Games

PUBLISHER
In-house



KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC

With a new Respawn game on the horizon, now feels like a fine time to revisit not only one of the best Star Wars games, but also the best game about forgetting you're actually evil. I last played *KOTOR* after watching the first Force Awakens trailer, so my hero looks slightly like John Boyega, and I feel like an idiot for ignoring that Rey was obviously the Jedi. It's a faff to make *KOTOR* run properly on a modern PC, but it's worth it. It still has some of Bioware's best characterisation, an incredible, moving score and one of the best twists in all of gaming. Which I've slightly ruined in the intro. Soz. ■

88



ALAN WAKE

Continuing with the amnesia theme (you spotted it, right?), we've got *Alan Wake*, a game about a man who forgets the book he wrote. I've tried to do that with reviews (60% for *Spec Ops: The Line*? Idiot) but never a whole novel. It plays like a '90s TV show that was slightly too scary to watch, and I adore it. I love that the hero is called Alan, that his books are probably shit, and that he looks like a member of Semisonic who's been kicked through FatFace. It's exceedingly silly – axes and gunfights and shadow monsters in log cabins – but it's made with palpable adoration for its influences, from King to Lynch to Hitchcock. Enjoyable enough Fortean nonsense. ■

76



CAVE STORY+

It should be enough to tell you that *Cave Story* is about an amnesiac boy rescuing rabbit people from an evil doctor. But if you need more reasons to play it, know that it's one of the best indie platformers ever made, especially if you love Metroidvanias. It's a huge, weird, engaging game – one moment I'm fighting a giant bar of soap, the next, a rabid, mutated version of the very bunnies I'm apparently here to save. This version gives an extra level of sheen and a remastered soundtrack. ■

82

TIME TO STEP OFF THAT TREADMILL

With so many demands from work, home and family, there never seem to be enough hours in the day for you. Why not press pause once in a while, curl up with your favourite magazine and put a little oasis of 'you' in your day.

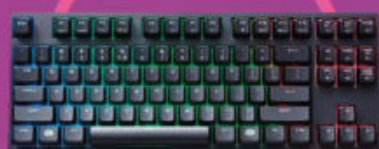


PRESS PAUSE
ENJOY A MAGAZINE MOMENT

To find out more about Press Pause, visit:
pauseyourday.co.uk

HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE



98

GROUP TEST

Our roundup of the finest keyboards that money can buy.



102

BUYER'S GUIDE

Get the best PC parts for your build, no matter your budget.

If it wasn't for keyboards, this magazine would be very different.

GROUP TEST

GAMING KEYBOARDS

Our choice for the best gaming keyboard that will let you dominate the battlefield but avoid penury.

By Alan Bradley

PC peripherals have become a hot market in the last decade or so, and nowhere is that more obvious than in the gaming sub-sector, which means anyone shopping for the best gaming keyboard in 2019 has a massive number of options at their fingertips.

We're seeing an incredible array of products across all sorts of switches and feature sets, from keyboards that act more like gamepads than traditional decks to boards that flash a Christmas in Rockefeller Plaza level of coloured lighting spectacle.

While this means that there's a range of choices at the both the top and bargain tier, it can also breed a level of marketplace confusion, so we've tested dozens of decks both new and old to help you.

The first step to finding the best gaming keyboard to fit your needs is educating yourself. First, you need to figure out whether you want the durability and responsiveness of a mechanical keyboard or the plush softness of a membrane deck (or some option in between, like Razer's mecha-membrane offering). If you do opt for a mechanical board,

you then need to figure out which switches you prefer. Want to type stealthily away in your office without alerting/annoying your co-workers? Try a Razer Yellow, or Cherry Red or Silent Red. Or, if you want to replicate the feeling (and noise) of a traditional typewriter, something like the Razer Orange or Cherry Blue switch will get you the closest. Outside of those core families, there are also options like Razer's opto-mechanical switch which 'actuate at the speed of light' and can only be found in their Huntsman line, or alternative manufacturers like Kailh or Logitech.





2

K95 RGB Platinum

CORSAIR £170

The best gaming keyboard

1 When you want to go the extra mile and upgrade to the absolute best of the best, it's hard to find a better option than the Corsair K95 Platinum. The K95 Platinum is a big keyboard: its enormous footprint still requires some desk cleaning before it can be nested comfortably. But feature wise, the K95 Platinum has got it all. Dedicated media controls and a USB pass-through, a metal volume wheel, RGB lighting. It even comes with an extra set of textured keycaps for the WASD keys. While it's expensive, you do know what you're getting for your money here.

I also love its detachable wrist rest, which makes things super comfortable for long gaming sessions (and this keyboard is particularly great for both strategy games and MMOs). The rubberized wristpad attaches magnetically and has two contrasting textures: one smooth side and one rough side. Switching sides is as easy as flipping it over, and the added comfort it brings is exceptional.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Huge range of switches
- Durable, high grade keycaps
- No backlighting
- No wristrest

SPECS SWITCH: CHERRY MX SPEED, BROWN / **SIZE:** FULL SIZE / **BACKLIGHTS:** RGB / **PASSTHROUGHS:** USB / **MEDIA CONTROLS:** DEDICATED / **WRISTREST:** DETACHABLE

Alloy Elite

HYPERX £133

The best simple gaming keyboard

2 The HyperX Alloy Elite sports a simple aesthetic while still packing most of the features we expect out of a quality gaming keyboard. It comes in your choice of Cherry MX Brown, Blue, and Red. What it lacks in a dedicated macro column, it makes up for with an affordable price point and quality design.

The HyperX Alloy Elite leaves no box unchecked in features. It's equipped with dedicated media controls, USB passthrough, a detachable wristrest, and red backlighting. To up its aesthetics, it also includes an extra set of silver keycaps for WASD and the

first four number keys.

The board supports full N-key rollover, meaning you never have to worry about key presses not registering.

The RGB model of the Alloy Elite will cost you around £130. Previously, I've recommended the cheaper variant that replaced RGB with red backlighting. But that model is now unavailable in most stores, and is no longer advertised on HyperX's website.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Great feature set
- Relatively affordable
- Red backlit variant now hard to get
- RGB lighting costs more

SPECS SWITCH: CHERRY MX BLUE, BROWN, RED / **SIZE:** FULL SIZE / **BACKLIGHTS:** RGB / **PASSTHROUGHS:** USB / **MEDIA CONTROLS:** DEDICATED / **WRISTREST:** DETACHABLE

GROUP TEST



**PACKED WITH THE
ADDITIONAL FEATURES
THAT ELEVATE A
GAMING KEYBOARD**

MK850

COOLER MASTER **£187**

The best keyboard to replace a gamepad

3 Cooler Master may not be the first name that springs to mind when you think of gaming keyboards, but the MK850 may very well change your mind. The headline feature of their latest peripheral offering is the aimpad technology built into a subset of the deck's keys, which transform them with the push of a button into analog inputs not unlike the analog stick on a gamepad. This means that you can push a key part of the way down and it'll register the input differently than pushing it all the way to the floor. It's a useful feature, particularly in stealth or racing games.

It's not just the aimpad that makes the MK850 a great board, though. It's packed with the additional features that elevate a gaming keyboard, stuff like a row of dedicated macro keys and media controls, USB passthroughs, and Cherry MX Red switches. And it's an attractive deck, with raised keycaps and a supportive magnetic wrist rest and anodized aluminium backplate.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Unique, analog aimpad technology
- ⊕ Full media controls
- ⊖ High resistance
- ⊖ Slightly awkward macro positioning

SPECS SWITCH: CHERRY MX RED / **SIZE:** FULL SIZE / **BACKLIGHTS:** FULL RGB / **PASSTHROUGHS:** USB / **MEDIA CONTROLS:** DEDICATED / **WRISTREST:** YES

Cynosa Chroma

RAZER **£58**

The best membrane keyboard for gaming

4 If even mechanical keys don't suit you and you demand a fully membrane typing/gaming experience, the Cynosa is the deck for you. It has some of the best feeling, low profile membrane keys I've ever tested, and at a retail price of under £60 is one of the most affordable gaming keyboards out there (past a certain threshold of quality). While it may lack some of the features a number of gaming boards pack in these days, stuff like a dedicated wrist rest or media controls, it does boast Razer's extensive RGB lighting, which can be programmed on a

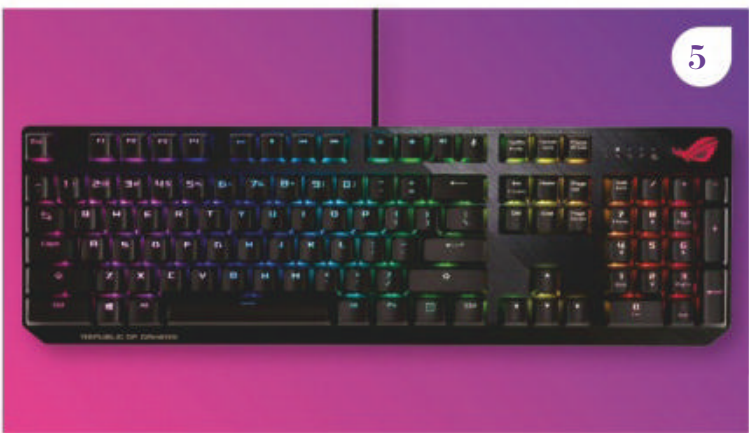
per key basis or applied by zones.

It's a solid, no frills, nice looking keyboard that's the best membrane option of a huge range that I've tested. There is a step-up version of the Cynosa available, but for slightly more the only real addition is underglow RGB, so unless that kind of 'ground effects' package is massively appealing to you, I recommend you save your cash and invest in the base model.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Best feeling membrane keys
- ⊕ Affordable
- ⊖ Per key RGB lighting
- ⊖ Lacks extra features

SPECS INTERFACE: WIRED USB / **KEYBOARD BACKLIGHTING:** PER-KEY RGB / **PROGRAMMABLE KEYS:** ALL / **FEATURES:** PER KEY RGB LIGHTING, SUPPORTS WINDOWS 7+ AND OSX 10.8+



Strix Scope

ROG £149

The best compact keyboard for shooter enthusiasts

5 Asus' ROG Strix Scope is a keyboard made for function over form. While it's festooned with the typical array of RGB lighting, the brushed aluminium offers an understated, industrial design. It's a welcome aesthetic in an era where flash and spectacle too often take precedence. The Scope is a solid, durable, reliable keyboard that works exactly as advertised without being weighed down by unnecessary gimmicks or unwelcome bloat. And with a wide range of Cherry's RGB switches, you can find the Scope in practically any flavour you'd like.

It also has a few quality of life features to appeal to shooter fans. Full macro customisation is available, and the left Ctrl key has been broadened to make it easy to hit without accidentally actuating other keys. The more compact form of the Scope also means that it (and all the other bottom row keys so often critical in FPSes) is really easy to reach down and smack when you need it.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Understated focus on functionality
- ⊕ Wide Ctrl button
- ⊖ No wrist rest
- ⊖ No passthroughs or macros

SPECS SWITCH: CHERRY MX RGB BLUE, BROWN, RED, BLACK, SILENT RED, SPEED SILVER / **SIZE:** FULL SIZE / **BACKLIGHTS:** RGB / **PASSTHROUGHS:** NO / **MEDIA CONTROLS:** NO / **WRISTREST:** NO

Huntsman Elite

RAZER £200

The best keyboard for incredible performance

6 The Huntsman family of Razer keyboards is the only place in the world to find their opto-mechanical switch, and it's one of the best switches on the market. The opto-mechanical build eschews traditional metal contacts, and instead actuates by a beam of light that fires through the switch when the key is depressed, meaning actuation is almost instantaneous. The other major advantage of removing all the relatively frail, slender metal contact pieces from the switch is that they're rated as twice as durable as standard mechanical switches, up to 100 million

keystrokes. They're tactile switches that actuate at 1.5 mm and 45g of force, meaning they're ridiculously easy to spam but still provide tactile feedback. The rest of the Elite is well designed too, with a comfy detachable magnetic wrist rest, a full suite of dedicated media controls, and a multi-function dial that can be used for anything from altering your PC's volume to scrolling through lighting suites.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- ⊕ Excellent opto-mechanical keys
- ⊕ Fully lit, durable full sized board
- ⊖ No passthroughs
- ⊖ Steep price point

SPECS SWITCH: RAZER OPTO-MECHANICAL / **SIZE:** FULL SIZE / **BACKLIGHTS:** 16.8 MILLION COLOR RGB / **PASSTHROUGHS:** NO / **MEDIA CONTROLS:** DEDICATED / **WRISTREST:** DETACHABLE MAGNETIC

YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

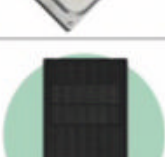
You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£1,074

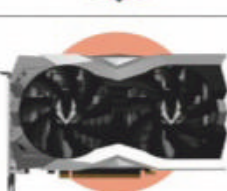
MOTHERBOARD		B360M-DS3H Gigabyte £67 It lacks overclocking options, but the new B360 chipset is far cheaper than the Z370 and is perfect for this budget build.
PROCESSOR		Core i3-8100 Intel £117 A great processor for out-of-the-box gaming performance. Opt for the AMD Ryzen 1300X if you'd like to overclock.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 2060 Twin Fan Zotac £331 The 2060 is marginally pricier but noticeably better than our old 1060, making it the go-to budget GPU of the moment.
COOLER		Hyper 212 Evo CoolerMaster £28 Even a budget build can benefit from a good CPU cooler, letting you enjoy a quieter, cooler system.
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 8GB (2x4GB) @2400MHz Corsair £41 DDR4 prices are still high, however this Corsair pair is a good value option.
POWER SUPPLY		CX-M Series CX550M Corsair £59 A UK price spike in our previous EVGA 500W pick opens the door for this quiet Corsair option.
SSD		MX500 250GB Crucial £45 Crucial's SSD range is fantastic value and offers good performance, too. A 250GB drive can hold your OS and essential programs.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200RPM Western Digital £38 One terabyte of old-fashioned hard storage is the perfect home for all of your media, backups and storage-hungry games.
CASE		Neos Bitfenix £34 The Neos provides decent airflow, good support for 3.5-inch hard drives, and a fairly painless build experience.
DISPLAY		G2460PF AOC £199 This is the cheapest 144Hz gaming monitor you can buy, yet it still offers decent image quality, great performance and Freesync.
KEYBOARD		K55 Corsair £55 This keyboard may lack mechanical keyswitches but it offers decent typing, plus it has RGB and extra gaming keys.
MOUSE		Rival 110 SteelSeries £30 A great sensor, simple design and impressively low price make this a great entry-level gaming mouse.
HEADSET		Cloud Stinger HyperX £30 We love the HyperX Cloud, but at £70 it's too much for an entry-level system. The Cloud Stinger is the next best thing.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,575

MOTHERBOARD		Prime Z370 A II Asus £146 Great shielding, full of features, and featuring that – ahem – all important RGB lighting, this is a fine Asus board.
PROCESSOR		Core i5-8600K Intel £245 Six cores, six threads, good out-of-the-box clock speeds – and it's overclockable. No performance bottlenecks with this installed.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 2060 Twin Fan Zotac £331 Serious power from the 'just about affordable' end of Nvidia's new GPU fleet, and it's ray tracing-ready too.
COOLER		Hydro Series H55 Quiet Edition Corsair £55 Tidy and quiet, the H55 will unlock our CPU's overclocking potential and look good through your case window while it does so.
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 16GB (2x8GB) @2666 Corsair £83 16GB is the minimum amount of RAM we'd recommend for a system of this calibre.
POWER SUPPLY		CX 650W Corsair £67 It may not feature fancy modular design, but Corsair's reliable CX 650 is cheap enough to accommodate for our other part picks.
SSD		MX500 250GB Crucial £45 This is still our SSD of choice. We've kept the capacity the same as our cheaper build, but upgrading to 500GB would be ideal.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200RPM Western Digital £38 SSDs are great, but they're still far from cheap. This 1TB HDD will hold as many games as you will need.
CASE		Eclipse P400S TG Phanteks £72 The clean lines, intuitive build features and fantastic price cements the Eclipse as our mid-range case of choice.
DISPLAY		Optix MAG271CR MSI £290 Curved, stylish, and offering 144Hz refresh rates, our MSI monitor pick suits pros and would-be pros alike.
KEYBOARD		One Ducky £90 A lesser known keyboard brand with a great rep among mechanical switch nerds. Ducky delivers the goods with the one.
MOUSE		AW958 Elite Alienware £46 Suitable for any grip thanks to its add-ons, and there's just something about those massive metallic buttons.
HEADSET		HyperX Cloud Kingston £67 Despite the budget price, we recommend this headset. There's simply nothing better for the money.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£3,827

MOTHERBOARD



Strix X470-F Gaming

Asus **£185**

Get the most from the new AMD Ryzen 2700X with this matching X470 motherboard that's packed with features.

PROCESSOR



Ryzen 7 2700X

AMD **£285**

Easy to overclock and with huge performance out of the box, AMD's new flagship CPU is the one to go for.

GRAPHICS CARD

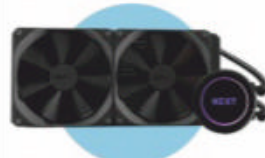


GeForce RTX 2080Ti Black Edition

EVGA **£1,073**

EVGA's custom design is considerably cheaper than Nvidia's reference card, and with great cooling.

COOLER



Kraken X62

NZXT **£120**

The Kraken is the culmination of three of our favourite things: an infinity mirror, a 280mm radiator and slick braided cooling.

MEMORY



Vengeance LED RGB 32GB @3200

Corsair **£217**

Ryzen is the one processor that does benefit hugely from higher-frequency memory. This kit is perfect for any would-be video expert.

POWER SUPPLY



HX750i 80 Plus Platinum

Corsair **£149**

Modular, custom cable kits, and a platinum efficiency rating. What's not to love about this Corsair PSU? Nothing, that's what.

SSD



970 Evo 500GB M.2 PCIe SSD

Samsung **£108**

Samsung's newest NVMe SSDs push performance to new heights and cost the same as the previous 960 range.

HDD



WD Blue 4TB

Western Digital **£92**

With a large boot SSD, there's little need for a large, cheap SSD. Instead we've opted for a huge 4TB hard drive for all your bulk data.

CASE



Enthoo Evolv ATX TG

Phanteks **£135**

The 5mm thick aluminium panels resonate with svelte professionalism, and the interior makes building inside this a dream.

DISPLAY



AW3418DW

Alienware **£998**

34 inches of curved, beautifully presented 120Hz display with the added benefits of G-Sync. One for aesthetes and athletes alike.

KEYBOARD



K70 LUX RGB

Corsair **£115**

Even when money is no object it's hard to argue against Corsair's latest K70. A no-fuss, solid piece of aluminium craftsmanship.

MOUSE



Mamba Elite

Razer **£90**

A beautiful design, comfortable shape and outstanding performance make this a brilliant high-end gaming mouse.

HEADSET



Arctis Pro Wireless

SteelSeries **£260**

The top range model in SteelSeries' Arctis range offers it all – swappable batteries, killer tone, handy controls and much more.

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING

Outside of Crucible, infinite grenades is good fun.



“You get a new grenade every couple of seconds. It’s a disaster.”

A fabled journey in **DESTINY 2**

Destiny 2’s PvP is a bit of a mess – neglected, unbalanced and with a bizarre idea of what constitutes good matchmaking. That’s particularly true of competitive mode, which foregoes standard practices like placement matches or leagues in favour of resetting everyone each season and making all players, whatever their skill, scramble from the bottom afresh.

At the same time, some of *Destiny 2*’s best guns require players to reach Fabled – the midpoint on the competitive ranking system. I have never done this, because, despite having played a lot of *Destiny 2*, I’ve barely touched competitive at all.

PHIL SAVAGE



THIS MONTH
Engaged in
electroshock therapy

ALSO PLAYED
Sea of Thieves

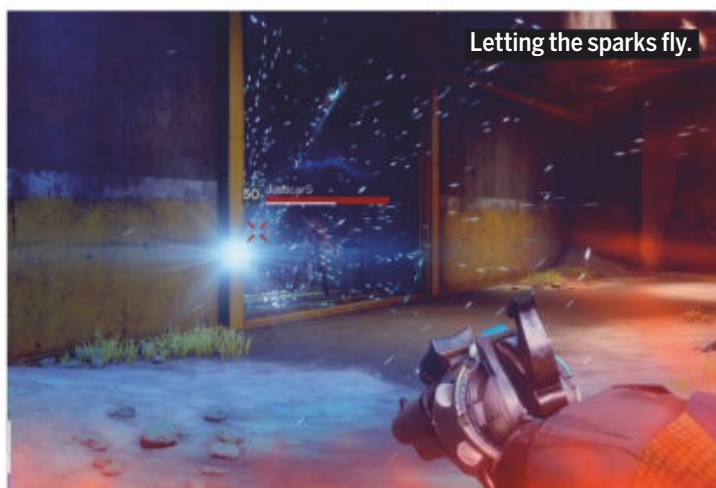
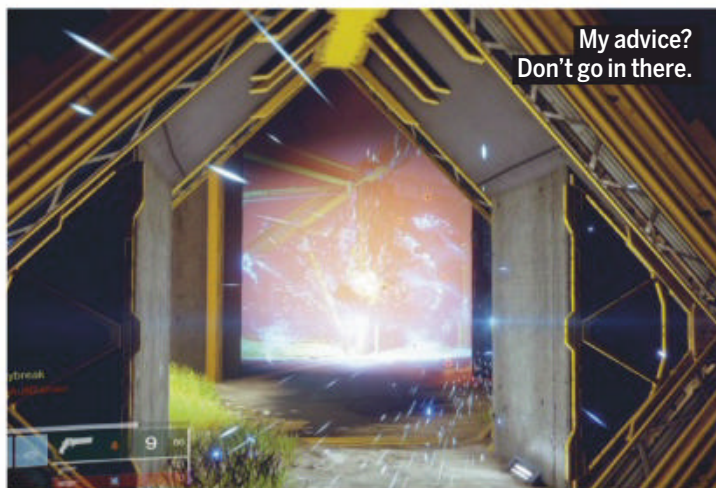
This season, though, Bungie has doubled the number of rank points you gain (or lose) from wins or losses. Theoretically, it should take half as many games to reach Fabled. I’m going to give it a shot.

It’s not an auspicious start. In my first week, I win one game and lose two, resetting me back to zero points. It’s not a complete waste, though. As long as you play three games in a week, you’re gifted a bunch of rank

points at the start of the next. It’s progress of a sort.

I return the next week and collect my bonus points. I’m now ranked Guardian III – a whole 7.6 per cent of the way to my target! And I’ve not even done anything. I win my next game, and the game after. And then I keep winning. I start to wonder if I am actually the best competitive *Destiny 2* player in the world without even knowing it? By just my tenth game I’m Brave III, which is nearly halfway to my goal.

BY JUST MY TENTH GAME I’M BRAVE III, WHICH IS NEARLY HALFWAY TO MY GOAL



Game 11. The opposition are all in the same clan. They're going to be more organised and more strategic than my group of random players. Still, I've beaten clans before, we just need to... oh. One of our teammates has quit the match. We're screwed.

I am undone. I lose three of my four next games. Then, when I log in the next week, things have somehow gotten worse. Bungie has launched a new event, The Revelry, and with it a special tonic that makes your grenade ability recharge incredibly fast. With a full set of the event armour, you get a new grenade every couple of seconds. It's a disaster. I lose my next four games in a row, wiping my reset bonus and then some.

WARLOCK LOCKDOWN

As a Warlock, my character doesn't have the best grenades, but I realise that a significant number of players struggle to realise when they're standing in an arc pulse grenade. Pretty soon I'm carpet bombing objectives with area-of-effect lightning death.

It... works, mostly. There are still losses, but also wins that only happened because I threw so many grenades that the other team couldn't capture the middle point.

In the second week of The Revelry, after 47 total competitive games, I finally reach my total. Some might say I've cheesed my way to my pinnacle rewards. But do I feel bad? No. I don't. ■



“A ghost asked me to fix her TV set”

Enjoying dilapidated sights in **KENTUCKY ROUTE ZERO**

MALINDY HETFELD



THIS MONTH
Meandered through the
American south at night

ALSO PLAYED
Anno 1800

I've never played *Kentucky Route Zero* before, out of fear of falling in love with a work in progress. Time passed, my mind changed and the end of this strange painting of a game finally drew near.

Many games take place at night, the time of day when monsters come out or criminals go and do their dirty work. But so many people work at night and see a completely different side of the world, where everything seems much more subdued and people perhaps feel free to act a little differently as well.

Add to that how *Kentucky Route Zero* takes place in those tiny communities and lonely houses away from the main roads of America – locations that have inspired games like *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* or much of Neil Gaiman's work – and suddenly the supernatural and just plain eerie doesn't feel so unlikely anymore.

I think my task is to deliver something, but everything in this game is geared towards distraction.

A ghost asked me to fix her TV set when all I needed were directions.

The first thing I can think of, looking at her lonely house high up on a hill, is of course, what else is she going to do all by herself than watch television?

ROADTRIPPIN'

Elsewhere, a group of bears inhabits their own floor of an office building. Bears are large creatures, they take up a lot of space and they take ages at the printer. Best give them their own floor. Games can be very selective about what I'm supposed to find strange – zombies and gelatinous masses with eyes are standard fare now – but *KRZ* has this fascinating way of making me aware of the strangeness of my surroundings, simply by never remarking on them at all. Random acts of kindness pave my way. Anywhere I arrive I take the time for a quick chat, just as you would do as a lonely soul on the road, getting sparse social interaction whenever possible.

Rather than follow the plot, I do nothing but cruise around the simple map during the endless night, listening to the satisfying hum of my truck's engine until out of nowhere a building appears.

I follow strange noises inside or peek through windows and encounter many a lonely soul continuing to do their work even when their body has long stopped moving. A bleak American Dream. ■



“I’m not sure what’s happening and my ship mysteriously powers down”

I rescued people from a burning space station in **ELITE DANGEROUS**, but should I have?

It’s been a while since I last played *Elite Dangerous*, which makes the moment when I jump into a random system and find a burning starport pretty shocking. As I approach, the flight controller warns me that the station is in danger. The advertising billboards that normally guide pilots through the ‘mail slot’ as they dock have been replaced with flashing red signs saying “EVACUATE”. And I notice strange green splodges on the exterior walls, suggesting that the Thargoids – mysterious aliens slowly making their presence felt in *Elite*’s galaxy – are responsible.

Curiously, I still have the option to dock. The flight controller cautions me about high temperatures inside the station as I fly closer to the entrance, and I can see why. The cavernous interior is glowing hot with flames, and huge chunks of debris are floating inside, making my route to the landing pad extra tricky. The temperature gauge in my cockpit rises steadily as I touch down, and I fire up the mission board. Thousands of people are still stranded in the station, and because I have some

▶ ANDY KELLY



THIS MONTH
Saved a few dozen refugees from a stricken space station.

ALSO PLAYED
Heaven’s Vault

passenger cabins in my Asp Explorer, I decided to ferry them to safety.

A large Federation rescue ship is waiting nearby, but first I have to make it out of this station alive. As I approach the mail slot my ship is running at 200 per cent temp, damaging my hull and internals. I should probably bring some heat sinks next time to reduce the stress on my ship. But I make it out and I drop the refugees off at the rescue ship, earning some CR and Rep with the Fed. I did this out of the goodness of my heart, but payment is nice.

While the thrill of flying into the flaming station and rescuing people is way more exciting than the

commodities trading I usually indulge in, I eventually get bored, and so I look at other ways I can help the stricken starport. I notice that there’s a huge demand for water, so I fly to a nearby station, load up with about 80 tonnes of the life-saving liquid, and sell it to them.

ALIEN ENCOUNTERS

Later, when I’m back on my usual trading runs in a nearby system, I’m suddenly and violently yanked out of hyperspace. I’m not sure what’s happening and my ship mysteriously powers down. Then I see them above my canopy – three sinister, green-tinged Thargoid ships, just hovering, *watching*. My ship groans back to life and I slam my thrusters, worried the alien invaders will attack.

But they don’t. It seems they’re just observing me. It makes me wonder if I’ve made a powerful enemy by helping those refugees. I don’t know where this Thargoid storyline is going, but the way Frontier has subtly woven it into the galaxy in *Elite* is very well done. Accidentally stumbling into that burning station was a genuinely exciting (and eerie) moment, because I had no idea this stuff had been put into the game. ■

THREE SINISTER, GREEN-TINGED THARGOID SHIPS, JUST HOVERING, WATCHING

“I drift unhurriedly through the air like Mary Poppins”

Seeing the Star Wars potential in **TITANFALL 2**

The reveal trailer for *Jedi: Fallen Order* is full of minor feats of impossibility. The protagonist leaps great chasms, runs on vertical surfaces, and loosens the sturdy metal panels of a spaceship using only the spiritual spanner in his mind. I've played power fantasies like this before and am bracing for it to feel more like *Jedi: Fallen Order* under my fumbling fingers.

Or at least I was until I went back to *Titanfall 2*. Respawn's only single-player campaign to date is the sensible place to look for pointers on how its Star Wars game might play, and it bodes well for *Fallen Order*'s acrobatics. I really like how forgiving *Titanfall* is of my jumps and wall runs – matching my intentions, rather than punishing me for putting a foot wrong or botching a landing. There's no fall damage, something I've confirmed through empirical, if accidental, testing. I drift unhurriedly through the air like Mary Poppins, and the double jump allows me to correct my direction mid-flight – so I don't necessarily even need to know where I'm going before I leap. It's a

JEREMY PEEL



THIS MONTH
Believed a
super-soldier could fly

ALSO PLAYED
Jalopy

set of systems designed to deliver on the dream of me being a Pilot, a mech-melding parkour sharpshooter, and isn't conditional on me actually knowing how to do those things.

Other studios have made us feel special, of course – it's almost the industry standard to baby us into believing we're brilliant. But Respawn's magic is to pair that feeling of power with a terrible sense of vulnerability.

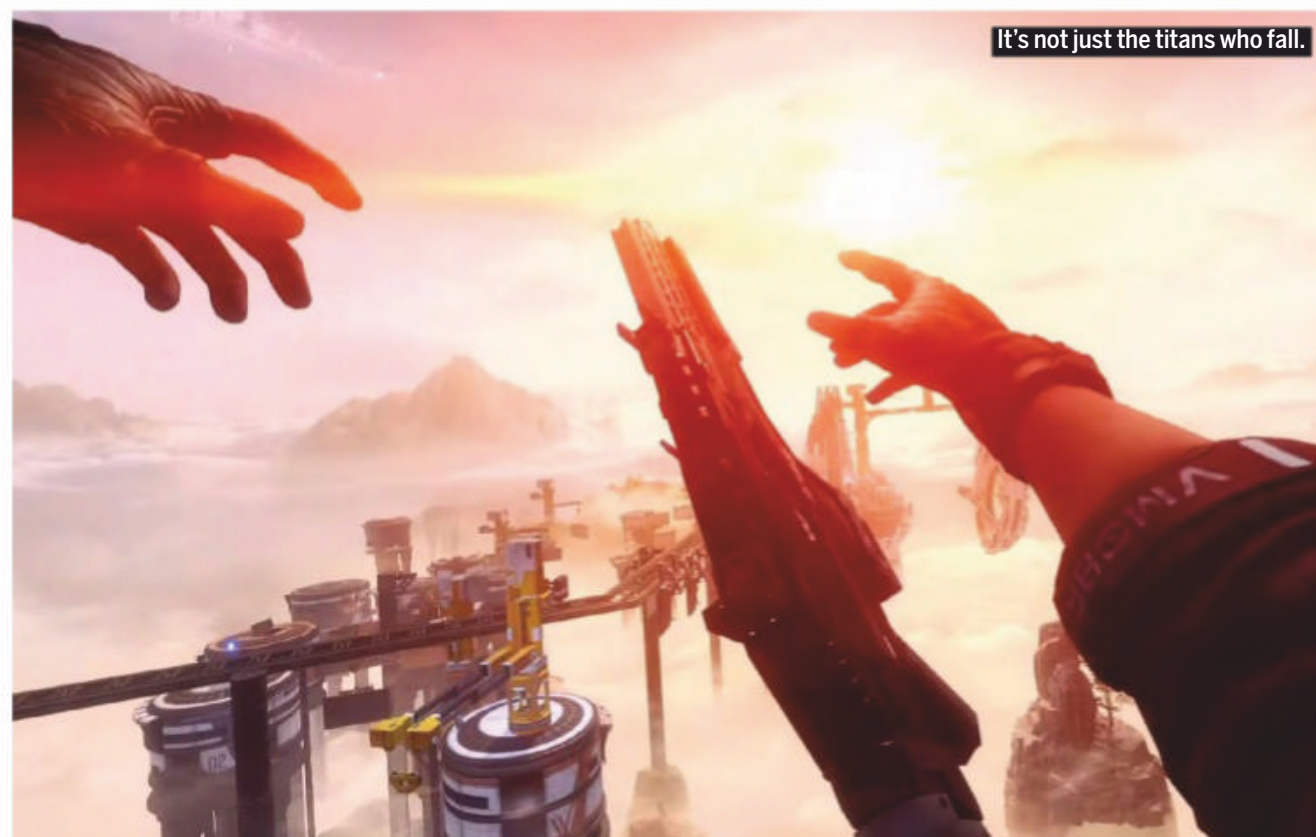
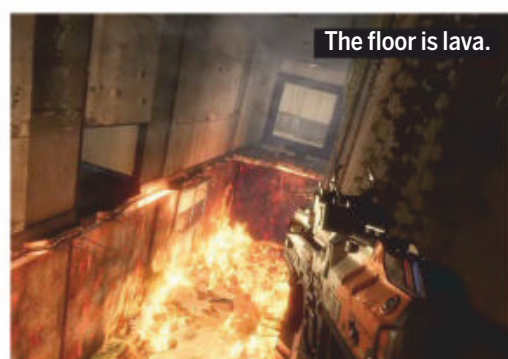
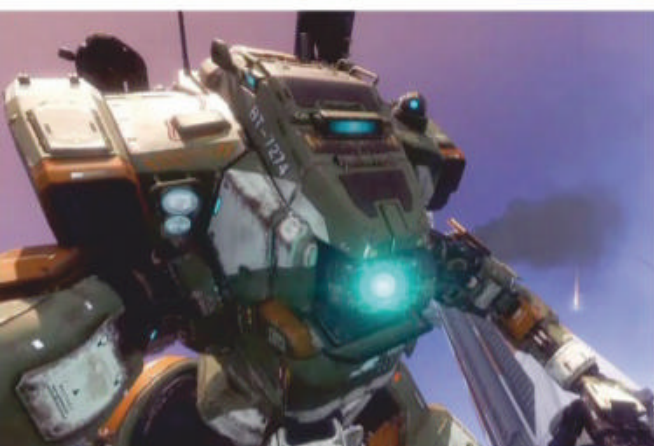
As a Pilot, I can feel all-too-squishable – especially on occasions where I'm caught out of my titan as the mechs start fighting above my flimsy head. Turns out I rarely feel

I DON'T NECESSARILY EVEN NEED TO KNOW WHERE I'M GOING BEFORE I LEAP

more connected to a world as when I'm at risk of being mashed into it. Yes, *Titanfall 2* is a power fantasy, but it doesn't compromise on the very human experience of absolutely shitting your pants.

TITANS VS JEDI

It's that human connection I'm hoping Respawn will bring to *Fallen Order*. Whisper it, but it's no real loss if the studio leaves the *Titanfall* universe behind – beyond the titans themselves, there's nothing particularly distinctive about it. But the way Respawn tells a story is second to none. If I simply inform you that your enemies in *Titanfall 2* are building, essentially, multiplayer arenas to practice killing you in, it's an interesting titbit. But the way Respawn does it – pulling you all the way along the production line, piecing together an Ikea colony before your eyes, and then leaving you to fight in the training ground you've just seen fabricated – is devastating, bringing home the odds against your frontier militia. Swap those rebels for the downtrodden Jedi and a world as deep and beloved as Star Wars, and I believe Respawn can do something extraordinary. ■





SEA OF THIEVES

The Anniversary Update adds something for everyone. *By Chris Livingston*

It's not just that the Anniversary Update for Rare's pirate game *Sea of Thieves* is big. And it really is: there's a new PvP mode, hours of new story and puzzle-driven quests, and a new activity, fishing. But it's not the amount of the new stuff that makes this update so exciting, it's that there's something for everyone from casual players to hardcore pirates, from solo sailers to full four-player crews. And all of it is really good.

Rare's multiplayer pirate game launched in 2018, and while it presented a mesmerisingly beautiful world it was also, largely, an empty and structureless one. Over the months it's gotten some additions like the Kraken, the megalodon, new missions types and new volcanic islands to visit, but those felt like patching holes on a sail – they were welcome changes, but nothing that really altered the general experience. The Anniversary Update is different. Not only is there more to do, there's more ways to do it, and *Sea of Thieves* now feels more like a complete game instead of an amusing sandbox full of beautiful seawater.

SCURVY DOGS

Arena mode is perfect for players who want some ship-to-ship combat with other players but don't necessarily have the time to search for it in the open seas of the main game, which can sometimes take hours. There's no need to go hunting for players now, Arena mode plops five crews in galleons onto a small circle of map in close proximity with each other, where they can battle on the sea and dig up treasure on a handful of islands. Matches last 25 minutes, and it's not battle royale – which feels downright refreshing in 2019 – so even when killed or sunk players will respawn. It's high-pitched, near-constant battle without much of a time investment, a perfect

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE March 20, 2018	DEVELOPER Rare
PUBLISHER Microsoft Studios	LINK www.seaofthieves.com

contrast to the often uneventful pace of the original *Sea of Thieves*.

Then there's Tall Tales, the ocean-combing new campaign quests, which can be attempted solo or with friends and completed in a more leisurely series of sessions. Players find journals and ship logs that send them across the world trying to unravel vague clues, acquire mysterious items, and solve puzzles at sea and on a number of different islands. It has a Goonies-esque feel – in one quest there's a secret chamber beneath an island that seals players

inside and fills with water as they rotate rune-carved pillars to unlock the door before they drown.

Tall Tales is a great addition for new players looking to discover the world, and for someone like me, who's crisscrossed the map dozens of times, it reintroduces a bit of excitement upon finding the correct island alluded to in a journal. I've landed on Liar's Backbone or The Crooked Masts plenty of times before to dig up treasure, but now there's something fresh and unexpected waiting there.

NEEDS SOME LEMONS

Fishing, something loads of players have wanted since *Sea of Thieves* first launched last year, has arrived as well. While the actual act of fishing is a pretty simple affair, the fish themselves are wonderful and varied. There are ten different species, each with five variations (plus a larger



NOT ONLY IS THERE MORE TO DO, THERE'S MORE WAYS TO DO IT

'trophy' version of each). One variation out of each five is extremely rare and can take hours of casting to catch, giving completionists something to grind for.

Some fish only appear in certain parts of the world, or in certain circumstances such as during storms or at randomly spawning shipwrecks or in the dead of night.

Plus, fish can be cooked and used as a healing item, or sold to the new Hunter's Call faction at tiny seaports scattered around the map in exchange for commendations and new titles. (I am now 'Hunter of Pondies', having pulled five different fish out of a tiny freshwater pond. It took hours. It was worth it.)

Players, depending on their style, can treat fishing like a quest, an obsession, or as a casual activity on long voyages or during their crew's downtime. Just like the Anniversary Update itself, when it comes to fishing there's a little something for everyone, no matter how they play. And this, alongside Tall Tales and Arena, makes it the perfect occasion to return to *Sea of Thieves*, or to try it for the first time. ■

THOU SHALT HAVE A FISHY

Top tips on how to cook your catch

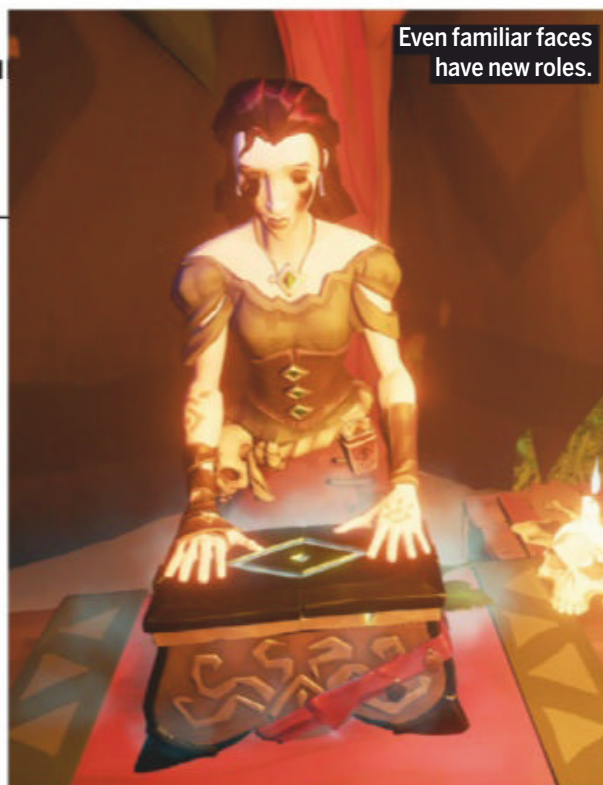


- There's a frying pan on each ship.
- You can also use island campfires.
- Don't wander off! Cook fish too long and they'll burn.
- When they're ready, the fish will lose colour and turn white.
- You can also cook shark meat, pork, chicken, and snake!
- Kraken meat, too.
- Serve in your hand, goes well with grog.
- You can't cook fruit.
- I mean you can, but it'll be ruined.

Sunken ships store secrets.



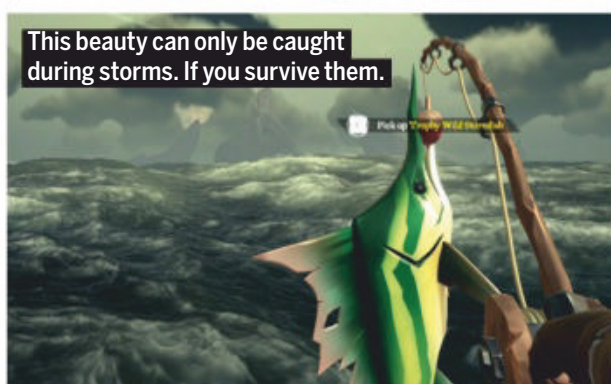
Even familiar faces have new roles.



The rare Bright Pondie.
Took me three solid hours.



This beauty can only be caught during storms. If you survive them.



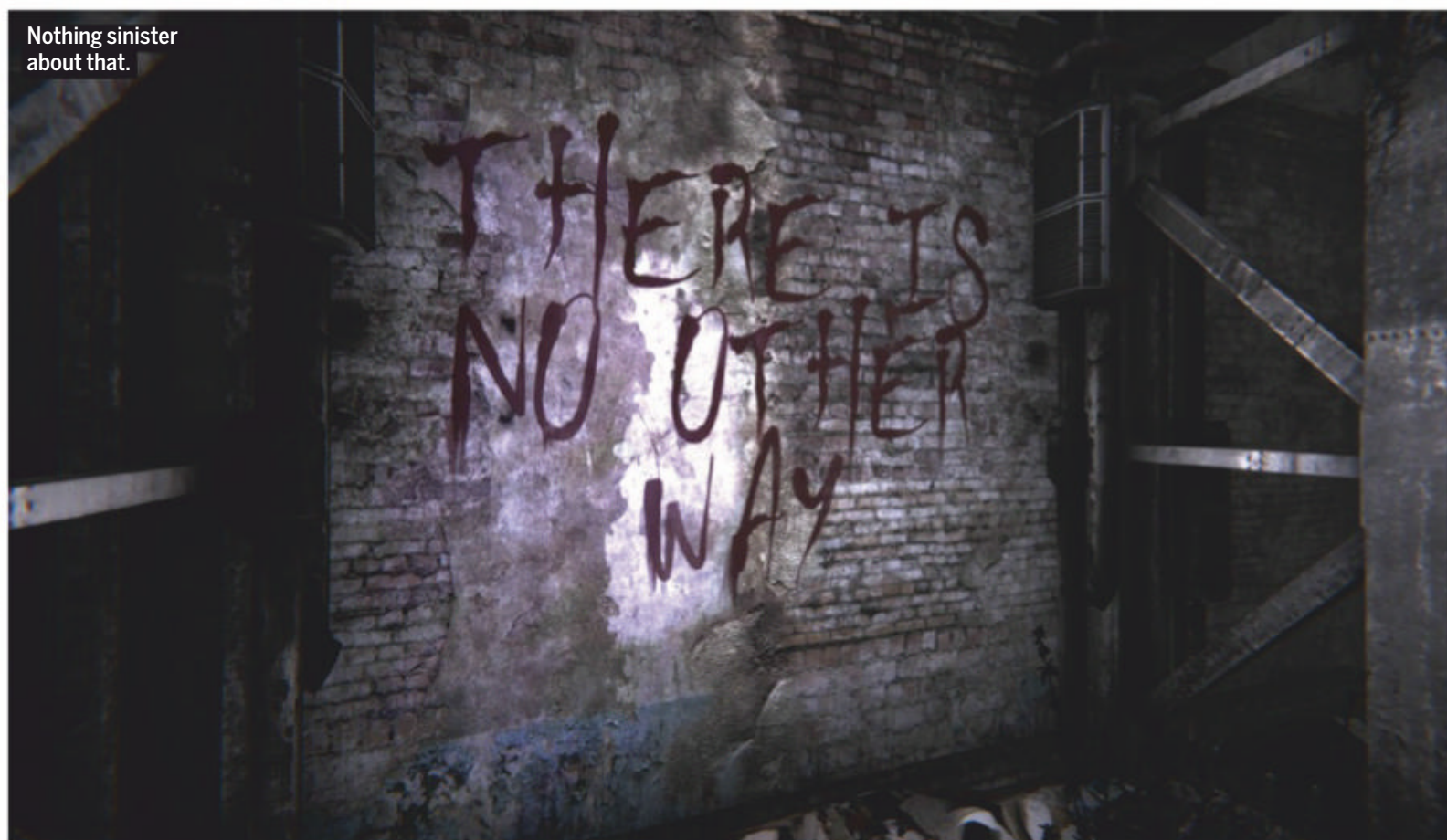
Sell fish for fun and profit (and titles).



You can fight back,
but ammo is precious.



Nothing sinister
about that.



TOTAL CHAOS

A mod that makes Doom 2 unrecognisable. *By Andy Kelly*

Yes, this is the Mod Spotlight section of the magazine, but calling Total Chaos a mod is doing it a disservice. This remarkable thing, created by Wadaholic, transforms *Doom 2* into a survival horror. But if you're expecting old *Doom* assets flipped into some kind of clunky horror game that sounds cool on paper but doesn't quite work, well... just look at the screenshots.

This is such a departure from the game it's based on that I'd believe you if you told me it was a standalone project built from the ground up. I should clarify, however, Total Chaos runs on GZDoom, a 3D-accelerated *Doom* port that adds support for dynamic lighting, sloped floors, *Quake 2*-style skyboxes, and other stuff the vanilla game could only dream of rendering. Even so, the fact that the guts of the ancient (but still great) *Doom 2* are powering this thing is impressive.

Wadaholic has been playing *Doom* pretty much his whole life, and started making his own maps at just eight years old. His first major mod release was *Doom Tournament*, a 32-level map pack that added CTF and king of the hill multiplayer modes to the game. But it wasn't until 2004, after releasing an early demo of what would eventually become Total Chaos, that the project began in earnest. Someone who played the demo commented saying that it was impossible to make a *Doom* mod scary, which inspired Wadaholic to prove them wrong.

He created several prototypes using the GZDoom engine, including an ambitious monsters versus marines multiplayer shooter with a *Counter-Strike*-style buy menu. But, eventually, he settled on the idea of a survival horror game, borrowing

elements from *Amnesia*, *Resident Evil*, *Silent Hill*, and even *Dark Souls*. And so, after a decade of experiments, false starts, and dead ends, Total Chaos as we know it was finally born.

VANISHING POINT

Total Chaos is set on Fort Oasis, a remote island in a wind-battered sea that was once home to a thriving coal mining community. But, suddenly, the miners disappeared, leaving the facility abandoned and *something* lurking in their place. The game begins with you waking up on the island after a shipwreck, with a voice on the other end of a crackly radio compelling you to find them. But it's clear from the offset that something has gone seriously wrong here.



IT'S CLEAR FROM THE OFFSET THAT SOMETHING HAS GONE SERIOUSLY WRONG HERE

The first thing you'll notice when you fire up Total Chaos is how good it looks – and I don't just mean for a *Doom* mod. Wadaholic has done some incredible stuff with GZDoom here, taking advantage of the popular port's support for high-res textures, detailed 3D character models, and ambient lighting. Fort Oasis is a beautifully filthy place with grimy textures, a tastefully muted colour palette and a subtly unsettling atmosphere reminiscent of the first few *Silent Hill* games. It also reminds me a lot of the similarly grubby *Condemned* games – those weird CSI-meets-*Manhunt* first-person shooters the world seems to have forgotten about.

There's also a surprising amount of sophistication in how the game



» builds tension, with flickering lights, an eerie ambient soundscape, and objects clattering to the floor as you turn blind corners. These are tricks that plenty of horror games pull, of course, but they're done well here – and, again, it's worth remembering that this is a *Doom* mod. Total Chaos also shows impressive restraint, taking time to set the scene and pull you into its bleak world before the action starts. And throughout the mod there are quieter moments to let you catch your breath.

As you explore the mining facility you'll often see brief flickers of the lives of the people who lived there before things went bad – shadowy silhouettes of miners going about their business, which is another example of Wadaholic using the foundations of *Doom* to do things the game was never meant to. It's a little derivative of *BioShock* and other horror games, which applies to almost every aspect of the mod, actually. But Total Chaos has enough personality to feel like more than just a pastiche of other games.

My first encounter with one of the creatures haunting Fort Oasis happens about 25 minutes into the game, in the form of a screeching, skull-faced zombie with glowing white eyes. I'm trapped in a series of narrow corridors with it, with only a pickaxe to defend myself and five breaker switches I have to pull to access the next area. Rather than attack the monster, I decide to just avoid it, running around it in circles, luring it away from the switches so I can safely yank them.

After outsmarting my zombie pursuer I slip into a newly opened room that's been plunged into darkness except for a flashing red light. I hear more screeching and look behind me, only to see an entire group of the bastards shambling towards me. This is one of several

tense set-pieces the game throws at you, and they're nicely scripted considering the limitations of the engine. After a mad dash through a network of maze-like corridors, chased by hordes of fiery-eyed demons, I emerge outside and I'm relieved to find myself on a desolate, foggy coastline.

There are crates scattered around the island containing health items and food, which factor into the game's survival elements. You have several stats to keep track of including stamina, hunger, bleeding, and radiation, all of which have to be managed with items scavenged from the world. But after breaking a few open my pickaxe shatters, which is the moment I discover the game has breakable weapons too. With a name



IT'S OBVIOUS THERE'S MORE TO YOUR ARRIVAL ON THE ISLAND THAN A RANDOM SHIPWRECK

like Total Chaos I was expecting this mod to be something like Brutal Doom, but it's actually a pretty hardcore survival game.

There's a story too, told through radio transmissions from that mysterious voice, as well as scattered notes and documents. And, naturally, being a horror game, there's a fair amount of environmental storytelling too in the form of sinister messages scrawled on the walls. The mod does a good job of building a sense of mystery, and it's obvious there's more to your arrival on the island than a random shipwreck. The ending (well, the regular ending – there's a secret one) is also incredibly depressing, which fits the generally downbeat atmosphere of the game.

Other monsters I encounter include a floating demon that can phase in and out of existence and shoot bolts of lightning, and a creature with a split, teeth-filled head like a mutated piranha plant, which looks like something out of *The Thing*. They aren't as scary as something like, say, the monsters from *Amnesia* or *SOMA*. But when you're trapped in the tight confines of some underground mining facility with them, hearing their shrieking through the walls, is unnerving.

Luckily, later on, you can fight back. Total Chaos' *Doom* roots are the most apparent when you get a hand on a weapon, although ammo is limited by design to force you to think carefully about each enemy encounter. There's a punchy pistol, a chunky shotgun, and an obscene super shotgun. But, for the most part, you'll be using melee weapons found scattered around the environment.

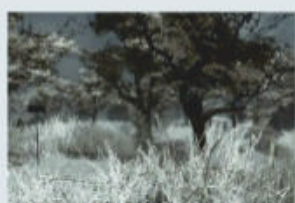
GOING SOLO

If you like the sound of Total Chaos and want to try it for yourself, the good news is that you don't need doom2.wad or even GZDoom to play it anymore. The game is now totally standalone and can be played immediately after downloading and unzipping it. I had no problems running it straight out of the box at 4K, and there's a vast selection of options to tweak the experience as needed, including a developer console that supports all your favourite *Doom* commands.

Wadaholic has also announced an official director's cut, which is currently scheduled for a June release – although it has been delayed once already, so don't hold me to that. This will expand on the storyline and add eleven new weapons, seven new enemies, and three new chapters. 'Madness' will see you battling through a submerged prison and a coastal town. 'Forgotten' takes place in a suburban district and promises to be the mod's largest map and 'Crossroads' is set in a forest. I can't wait to get this expansion.

Total Chaos is the most impressive mod I've played in some time, taking the essence of *Doom* and mutating it into something completely different. You can still feel the evil presence of Id's legendary FPS there, bubbling under the surface, but in an exciting and grimly beautiful new form. Wadaholic has hinted at a couple of new projects on his website, including a standalone horror game he hopes to release. But whatever he decides to do next, you can bet I'll be playing it. ■

FEAR FACTOR *Other spooky mods*



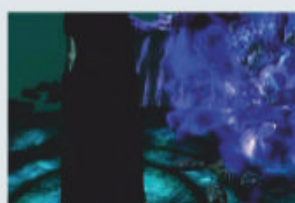
THE WORRY OF NEWPORT

A mod that turns *Crysis* into a moody, understated horror game. It's almost entirely story-based, with a focus on atmosphere over interaction.



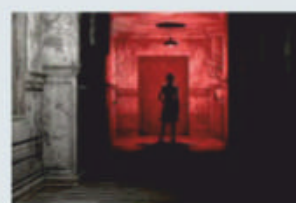
HUMANE LABS EXPERIMENTS

This mod takes the Humane Labs research facility from *Grand Theft Auto V*, which is part of a heist in the main game, and fills it with zombies.



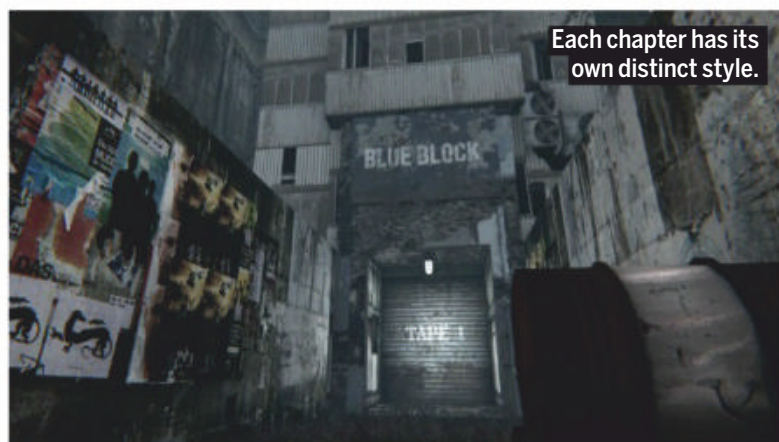
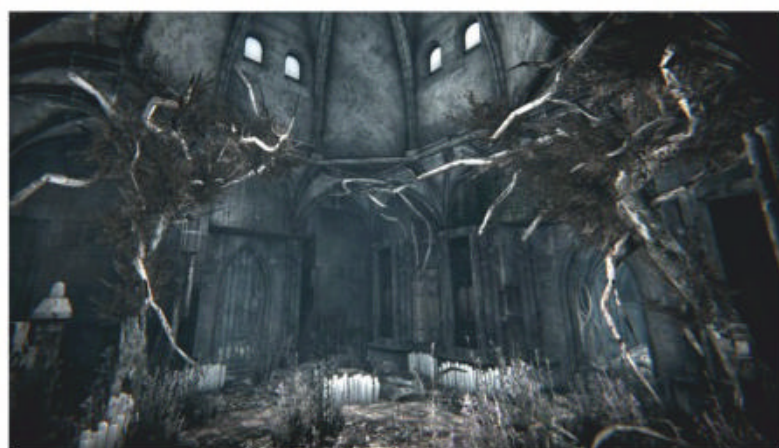
INTO THE DEPTHS

There are a lot of horror-themed add-ons for *Skyrim*, but this is one of the best. This begins like a standard dungeon crawl, but shifts into something more unsettling.



CLAUSTROPHOBIA

Set in a condemned apartment block, this *Silent Hill*-inspired mod brings a dash of psychological horror to the post-apocalyptic wasteland of *Fallout 4*.



Each chapter has its own distinct style.



Amazing to think *Doom II* is (sort of) capable of this detail.



I can't be sure, but I think it wants to murder me.

VISUAL NOVELS

Immerse yourself in a different genre. *By Malindy Hetfeld*

Just like JRPGs, visual novels can seem inaccessible at first, and have an unfair reputation for focusing on eroticism or just plain strangeness. Visual novels come in

all shapes, and while it helps to like anime tropes, the strength of these games is in the characters and storytelling. Visual novels are an important narrative genre used by developers around the world to explore relationships in depth.



START HERE

PHOENIX WRIGHT: ACE ATTORNEY TRILOGY

Fun, family-friendly and stuffed with memorable characters, *Ace Attorney* is the series that put visual novels on the map for many people.

It's also one of the most interactive. Attorney Phoenix Wright doesn't give up until he's cracked the case, even if he has to enlist ghosts and parrots as his witnesses.

MAD SCIENCE

STEINS;GATE

→ The many branching paths of a visual novel are a great vehicle for time travel, and *Steins;Gate* is the best example of this. It offers a fairly standard yet surprisingly dark narrative.



BAFFLING BIRD SIM

HATOFUL BOYFRIEND

→ You've likely seen this visual novel which began its life as an April Fool's spoof on dating sims. In a future in which birds rule over mankind, you're the only human at an all-bird high school. If you get far enough before the premise loses appeal, you'll uncover an intricate horror story. You should stick with it, because the end game is delightfully strange. Also, who wouldn't want to date *all* the birds?

BATTLE ROYALE ORIGINALE

DANGANRONPA: TRIGGER HAPPY HAVOC

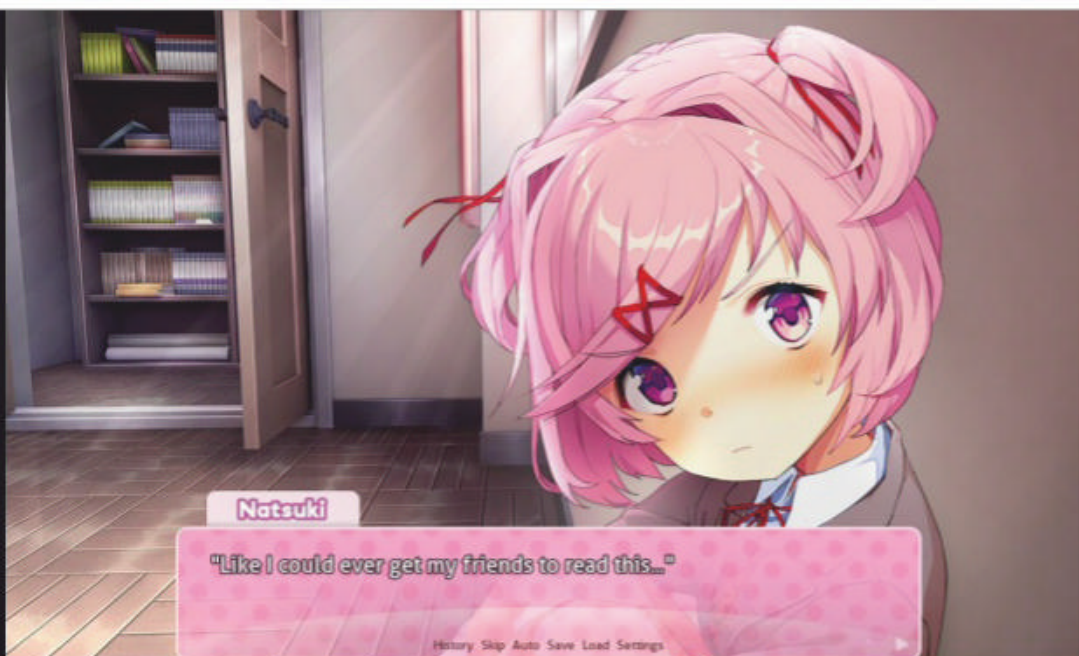
→ *Danganronpa* tells the story of 15 students trying to escape their school by murdering each other. You expose culprits in *Ace Attorney*-style classroom trials.



AVOID THIS

DOKI DOKI LITERATURE CLUB

An ambitious effort to play with the clichés of dating sims, *Doki Doki Literature Club* attempts to critically examine the role of the player. The psychological horror elements take things too far, resulting in a game that's overly crass. While innovative, *DDLC* fails to handle subjects such as mental health with the necessary care. Needlessly labouring the point of how it's different, it soon becomes a grind.



TIRED OF SCHOOL?

VA-11 HALL-A

→ If you just want to relax and have engaging conversations, try bartending sim *Va-11 Hall-A*. It's set in a cyberpunk world that features humanoid dogs and androids, but the topics your guests discuss pertain to real issues of today. The dialogue feels natural – your character Jill is a bartender who treats her patrons as her equals, whoever they are. And the drink mixing is a welcome diversion from reading.

LGBTQ+ FRIENDLY

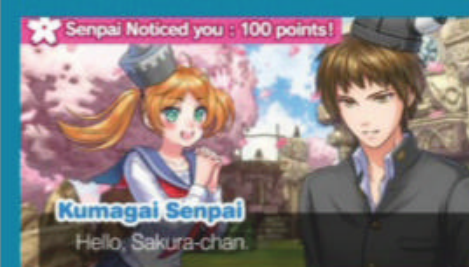
BUTTERFLY SOUP

→ Here you're not a guy trying to wheedle his way in with the ladies. *Butterfly Soup* focuses on two girls falling in love as they spend their days with their friends. Great writing offers believable relationships and fully realised characters, who you learn a lot about by taking control of different characters throughout.



TOP TIPS

How to become an avid fan



1 LEARN SOME TERMS

Not every visual novel is Japanese, but many use genre terms to describe their content. Being able to tell “nakige” from “otome” may help save time on the hunt for your next game.



2 EMBRACE ALL THE EMOTIONS

What often makes visual novels so appealing are the unforeseeable turns their plots can take. Their habit to go for maximum drama or romance can either be just what you need or severely exhaust you.



3 GET USED TO WAITING

Once thoroughly enamoured you may get to the point where you actively dive into the world of fan translations, or simply wait a long time to ever see a western release of that interesting visual novel.



PURIST'S CHOICE

CLANNAD

C*lannad* is the visual novel that originated many of the genre's conventions – a painfully average guy meets a number of cute girls and slowly gains their trust while he helps out at his high school's drama club. Its central romance features multiple branching pathways and doesn't shy away from bad outcomes. *Clannad*'s a real tear-jerker for many people, since it focuses on a terminally ill girl who, thanks to you, finds joy in life once more.



Get into the thriving roleplaying scene in GRAND THEFT AUTO V

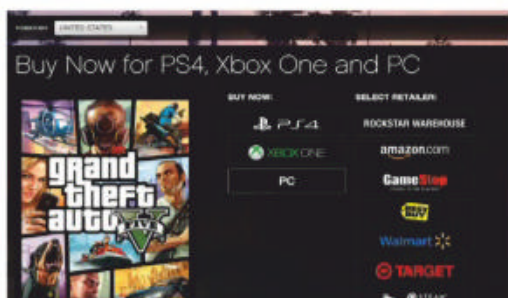
A world of storytelling and theatrics hides beneath Los Santos' criminal veneer. *By Joe Donnelly*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Easy

TIME
Less than an hour to get started

VITAL LINKS
www.rockstargames.com/V
servers.fivem.net
lossantoslife.com/rules



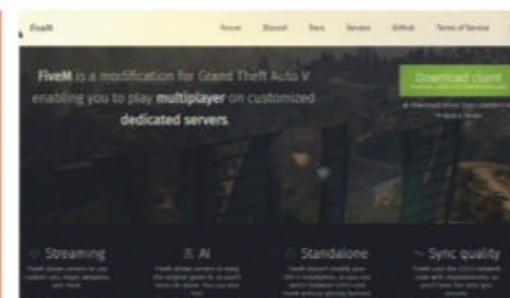
BUY GTA V

1 FiveM is an up-to-64-person open source community modification for *GTA V*, that allows mods on the client side of operation. It works independently of *GTA Online*. Simply put, you must own *GTA V* in order to roleplay in *GTA V*.



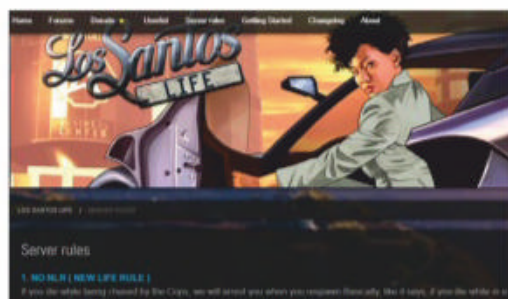
GET A HEADSET

2 There are a number of serious, text-based *GTA V* roleplay servers out there, but the best ones use voice chat. Newer versions of my favourite HyperX Cloud headset, pictured, retail for around £55.



INSTALL FIVEM

3 Download the free FiveM client via its website. Again it's worth noting FiveM doesn't modify your *GTA V* installation, which means you can switch between *GTA Online* and FiveM as you please, without worrying about getting banned by Rockstar.



LEARN THE RULES

4 *GTA V* RP players take roleplay rules seriously and so do server mods. You'll get kicked if you stray too far from these guidelines, so it's worth learning each server's ruleset before diving in. Los Santos Life's are a good rule of thumb resource.



CREATE A BACKSTORY

5 This isn't vital, but my most entertaining *GTA V* RP capers have unfolded off the back of a backstory. You'll probably find this reflects Step 9, but you'll benefit from going in with an idea of how and who you want to play as.

COMMIT TO YOUR CHARACTER

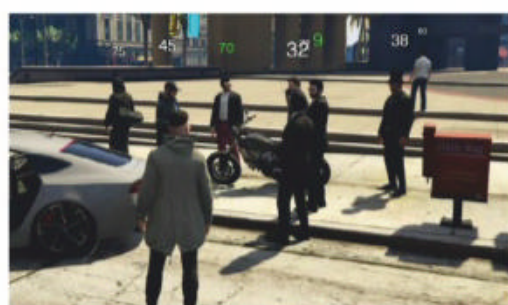
6 Two central tenets of roleplay are consistency and protocol. If you do decide to shift gears mid-game – I once evolved from a journalist to a bank robber – do so in a way that makes sense in the game world.



GET OVER YOURSELF

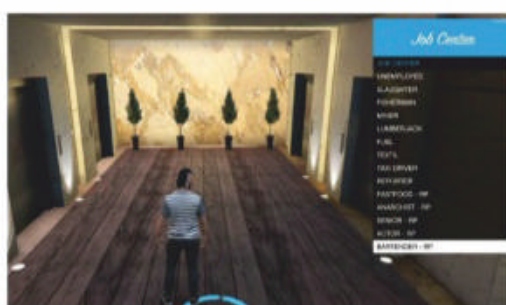
7 Don't be afraid to make an arse of yourself! Roleplaying is daunting, but regardless of your experience level, remember that everyone is on the same boat, and your input to the world is just as important as anyone else's.

KNOW YOUR ROLE *Get to grips with the particulars of a typical GTA V roleplay server*



TEST THE WATER

8 You might know the San Andreas map like the back of your hand, but taking a cab ride, visiting a clothes store, or hanging out in Legion Square are all great ways to meet people and get a feel for how things work in GTA VRP.



GET A JOB

9 This is where your journey properly begins. Choose your destiny as a taxi driver, bartender, lumberjack, journalist or delivery person, among other occupations. Of course, a host of nefarious trades also await those who dare seek them.



REALISE CRIME DOESN'T (ALWAYS) PAY

10 Break this rule with utmost caution, because GTA VRP servers are staffed with voluntary police officers, who often interview for their jobs in real-life and train in-game to enforce the law.



USE IN-GAME COMMUNICATION

11 Life Invader, GTA V's text-based social network, is an invaluable tool for maintaining RP protocol while querying what's going on. Hook up with potential pals, alert the authorities, or engage with the criminal underworld.



GET CREATIVE

12 The most important step of all. Organic stories will present themselves with the right group of roleplayers, but, like Step 5, starting sessions with a rough idea of where you wish to steer your story often results in some hilarious tales.



PICKING EVERY FIGHT IN MIRROR'S EDGE

PART I

Can you stand your ground
in a game about
momentum?

By Jeremy Peel

THE RULES

1 Whenever somebody attacks Faith, fight back.

2 Take every possible opportunity to use the guns.

3 Only run once all other options have been exhausted.

Mirror's Edge is worse off with guns. That's the received wisdom, anyway. The theory goes like this: DICE, upon inventing the running simulator, panicked a bit. Any new series is a challenge for a AAA developer – a cacophony of newness, where a sequel builds on past successes. And this game, more than most, was an expensive unknown – one that stripped away the familiar paraphernalia of first-person games. Sticking Colts and SCARs in *Mirror's Edge* was a way of anchoring it in something safe. The guns represented reassurance, both for the Battlefield developer and an audience it worried wouldn't quite get it.

Perhaps the studio was right to be worried – *Mirror's Edge* didn't sell particularly well by EA's standards. But a core fanbase really, really got into it. They understood it was a game about momentum, and that the guns were antithetical to that goal. They encouraged you to slow down and take aim, breaking the pumping pulse the game offered at its best.

People never really stopped talking about *Mirror's Edge*, and when the time came for DICE to have another crack at the series, it seemed to agree with the consensus. For *Mirror's Edge Catalyst*, the studio changed almost nothing about the pace or moveset of *Mirror's Edge*. But it got rid of the guns. In its place, DICE designed a melee system that would capitalise on momentum. You could gather speed, spring off a wall, and plough all that force

into the face of an enforcer. A suite of attacks was built to weaponise your catalogue of slides and spins. The idea was that you would use your enemies' armoured weight against them, sending them stumbling into your waiting foot for a roundhouse finisher.

In practice, most players weren't particularly hot on that either. In the wake of *Catalyst*, combat is still considered the weakest element of *Mirror's Edge*. I'm left wondering if we gave up on the guns too soon? What would a combat-heavy run of that first game feel like?

KICK! PUNCH! IT'S ALL IN THE MIND!

I'm going back to The City – to the time before it gained the addendum “of Glass”. I'm going to play through 2009's *Mirror's Edge* and take every possible opportunity to start a scrap. Wherever there's an option for flight, I'll

pick fight first. In each instance, I'll keep firing until the enemies have all fallen over or the ammo runs dry – whichever comes soonest. Faith might have got us this far, but it's time to meet Fury.

I'm on a job. The runners in The City exist in the membrane between civilised and criminal

society. They've opted out of the safe-yet-controlled culture down below, but stay sufficiently distant from real trouble that the police leave them alone. That precarious position limits their career options to, essentially, private postal work. And so today I'm carrying a bag across the rooftops to a comms tower, where another runner, Celeste, will take it to its destination. I'm hoping the package doesn't have a “this way up” on it – I'm doing a lot of forward rolls.

WHEREVER THERE'S AN OPTION FOR FLIGHT, I'LL PICK FIGHT FIRST

I worked hard for this result.
So why don't I feel proud?





GUERRILLA THOROUGHFARE *The games that mix parkour with combat*



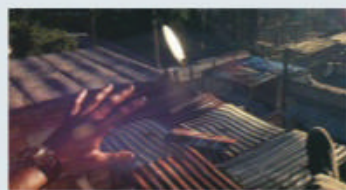
ASSASSIN'S CREED

Ubisoft's one-button-climbs-all navigation was groundbreaking, but recent entries have crept further from that focus.



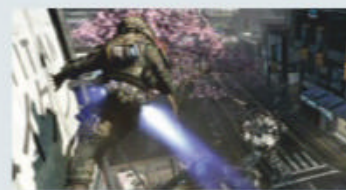
BRINK

Dirty Bomb developer Splash Damage applied slick rooftop moves to multiplayer. It's now free on Steam.



DYING LIGHT

Dead Island's zombie-mashing was upped by open world free-running and introduced stamina management.



TITANFALL 2

The magic of Respawn's wall-running is that it's forgiving, giving you space to line up your shots.

» Something unusual has happened, though. A news helicopter has tipped the cops off about my building-hopping activities. I suppose eventually a surveillance state polices itself. So much for living carefully on the mirror's edge – looks like I'll be putting my violent new set of rules to the test imminently.

Sure enough, when I drop through a vent into a high-rise intended as a shortcut, I find four cops waiting for me. Bullets follow my footsteps as I jog awkwardly into cover and survey my options.

The space I've just left is a small anteroom, in which the men with guns are no more than ten metres away. But as I turn the corner I find a stairwell, and a tall bank of lockers. I clamber on top, waiting for my pursuers to pass so I can hop down behind them.

If I'm going to pull this playthrough off I'll need to get used to disarming enemies – and that's far more easily done when they're facing the other way.

But no plan survives contact with dystopian reality. Philip K. Dick said that, probably.

When I slip behind the last cop to storm past my hiding place, he turns around at the last second, pushing against my shoulders. His colleagues open fire as I stumble, and I drop to the floor. This is no typical DICE shooter – Faith can only catch three or four bullets before taking a long lie down.

On the second attempt, I manage to plunge off the lockers and land on an enemy, Mario style, knocking him out. But when I reach triumphantly for his weapon, nothing happens. I can only see a baton on his waist – but I could've sworn he was firing at me just moments ago. Bewildered and blocked in, I run back the way the cops came and stare impotently at the anteroom's vending machine as red fills my screen. "Digglers doughnuts," reads the advertising. "Because life is sweet." My view turns on its side as another bullet enters my back.

After a few more tries, the game crashes to desktop, as if in protest. "You should always try to get away from hostiles," *Mirror's Edge's* tutorial tells me. The info box

shows an image of Faith running towards a SWAT team – and then a big, red arrow bending in a U-turn.

My handler Mercury – like the messenger god, or Merc to his friends – joins in by yelling over the radio. "Wire's going crazy, get out of there, Faith." Even the cops physically push me onward, like actors in interactive theatre. This isn't supposed to be a combat encounter. It's a prompt for a chase, to propel me through to the next area. Everything in the game is screaming at me to run, and I'm working against its nature.

If I'm going to control the situation, I'll need more space. I lead the police up the stairwell, looking back every few seconds to make sure they're still following, like a cat teasing a dog. Using the Mario technique, I'm able to use my height advantage to pounce on the cop at the front of the pack as they round the corner at the top of each staircase. I take out three this way, and shepherd the final officer out onto the rooftop.

Here I can play to my strengths. I sprint down the far end, where my opponent's bullets become distant annoyances. Then I spin around, ready to charge him like a jousting knight. Until a door crashes open on my flank, and two more cops shoot and shoot and shoot until my light frame is heavy with lead.

Repeating the sequence using the few close quarters moves available to me is gruelling and unsatisfying work – especially knowing that more forceful tools are, for reasons unknown, just out of reach. On the next attempt, though, I manage to take out the entire first squad on the stairs. Thumping trance escape music still plays, but it's quiet on the roof. This time I'm ready for the door to open, and kick the first cop in the shins. He doubles over in pain. The second opens fire as I retreat, nicking me in the shoulder, and I notice my palms are sweating as if I'm fighting a *Dark Souls* boss. Every time I stand and face my oppressors, I'm at a terrible disadvantage.

But then, as the first cop falls unconscious, something changes. Amid all the familiar smacks, grunts, and booms, a new noise – the clack of a metal object against a hard





surface. A gun. Barging past the goon in my face, I pick up the pistol and let off a few rounds into his chest. It's an ugly spectacle. There's no action movie feedback, no ragdoll pinwheeling across the terrain – just a man slumping onto concrete. I swap his loaded gun for my empty one, and run on.

Before long I've developed a nasty pattern – shooting a cop dead wherever they rear their masked head, before swapping my weapon for the one they've left flush with ammo. There's no way to know how many bullets I've got left: in accordance with the style of the time, *Mirror's Edge* rejects UI altogether, leaving the screen empty of distractions. But the pistols tend to click uselessly after just a handful of shots, and there's no way of storing clips, so I'll need to find new guns regularly if I'm to stay armed.

I murder my way to the comms tower, where my partner Celeste awaits.

"They're playing rough, Cel," Faith warns as she hands the bag over. Back in *Mirror's Edge*'s day, this is what we referred to as ludonarrative dissonance – the disconnect between a game's script and the way you play it. If the cops are rough, I'm playing far rougher.

SMASHING THE MIRROR

You can learn a lot about a game by breaking it. I've played *Mirror's Edge* for years, but only by opting out of its constant forward momentum have I started to appreciate how it works. It's not just the rooftop furniture of the game's levels that are designed to boost you forward – every successfully landed wall jump or pipe vault adding to your acceleration. The same is true of the script, the soundtrack, and the enemy placement. All of these

elements are deployed with careful timing to provide the wind for your sails, a series of convincing reasons to keep running all the way to your endpoint. I've every reason to believe that the devs at DICE would make fantastic personal trainers.

As I leap to this level's final rooftop, I can see how it's supposed to go. The news chopper, having made its story happen, is here to film it. A SWAT team arrives stage right, intended to funnel me over the lip of building. The helicopter draws level with the roof, its nearest landing skid glowing red – a sure sign, in *Mirror's Edge*'s colour-coded world, that it's part of the path.

"I don't care how you get off that roof, Faith," Merc prods. "Just do it." These Truman Show-esque performers aren't opponents at all.

They all want me to do the same thing – flee from the SWAT, their bullets raising this moment to

dramatic climax as I leap for the rail of the helicopter. Fade to black, next level. But those aren't my rules. I'm going to have to fight.

The rooftop is designed for a quick escape, not for hiding, but I use the sparse cover offered by fans and pipework to lure the enforcers into open space, darting out for jabs when it's safest. If I was a playtester, DICE's designers would be swearing quietly over my shoulder.

Just once I glimpse a flash of red – an opportunity to grab an assault rifle – but I miss my split-second window. Instead I manage to slide-kick and side-swipe my enemies senseless, leaving a strange silence. The news copter still hovers obediently in the air. I've given them one hell of a broadcast and with all of us at the mercy of this new playstyle, there's no telling what'll come next episode. ■

I MURDER MY WAY TO THE COMMS TOWER, WHERE MY PARTNER CELESTE AWAITS



“Characters that are essentially useless props still have detailed, fun stories to tell.”





THE CURSE OF MONKEY ISLAND

Keeping the love for a childhood favourite alive. *By Malindy Hetfeld*

The first PC game I ever played was *Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge*, which was included in a magazine. Because I was a kid, I lost it or scratched it as well the set of floppy disks I ended up playing the first *Monkey Island* on, forcing me to eventually buy a bundle of both games. That bundle, called *Monkey Island Bounty Pack* came with a demo of *The Curse of Monkey Island*. The year was 1997, and I had just found the game that would likely accompany me forever.

Childhoods are filled with weird compulsions. You eat your favourite snack until the mere sight is enough to give you hives, you read the same book over and over again and you fervently declare that you will never

stop loving whatever you love at the time. For many things you've loved as a child, games included, the fervour gradually cools.

We say goodbye to a lot of games we love, either due to technical constraints or simply because there are so many games to play. Sometimes we stop playing a game because we're worried the present reality won't hold up to the romantic memories we have of it. To me, *The Curse of Monkey Island* never fell into either box – I've played it at least annually for 22 years.

In the era of digital games that doesn't sound like much of a feat, but I've kept this game in its original box with me, moving to different flats and across countries. It felt very normal to do so; you pack your favourite book, I pack *Monkey Island* (and some underwear).

Looking at the system requirements really puts the continuous advancement of technology into perspective, right down to the paradoxical yet entirely understandable fear that your system has become too powerful to run your favourite game. 16MB RAM! Windows 95! DirectX 5!

Those were different times. Miraculously, *Monkey Island* always ran fine no matter what system I used, and I didn't need to use ScummVM to run it until a few years ago, just prior to its GOG and Steam releases. I didn't play the game like

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED
November 1, 1997

PUBLISHER
LucasArts

DEVELOPER
Inhouse

LINK
bit.ly/2PfNdYj



"Ask me about *Grim Fandango*" immediately had me interested.



"Hair from the dog that bit you" – superb hangover joke.



Now Guybrush taking humiliation in stride is really inspirational.

clockwork, like I had to uphold a tradition, but because inevitably, one day I'd think "this feels like a good time to play *Monkey Island*".

ISLAND GETAWAY

Perhaps playing isn't the right word anymore. After this long it's more like visiting a bunch of friends, like Willy Blondbeard in his chicken restaurant or Dinghy the dog. *Monkey Island* has always been a series of characters that don't exist to fulfil any grand narrative function. Rather, they're there to be manipulated by me, so I can get whatever item or piece of information I'm after at that time.

The outline of MI3 is simple – in order to lift a curse from his beloved Elaine Marley, Guybrush Threepwood, self-proclaimed mighty pirate, has to give her a ring symbolising true love.

He roughly knows where it is, but he needs a crew and a ship, and he hasn't really worked out the whole attaining the ring part, either.

Characters that are essentially useless props still have detailed, fun stories to tell, even when they're just built around one character attribute. Every pirate you meet, whether it's

on Plunder Island, a retirement community for pirates, or out on Blood Island, the pirate family resort, each has a great yarn of a past adventure to offer, and each of them has grown on me as a result.

Since I'm unable to play the game the way it was intended to be played by now, knowing the solution to every puzzle by heart, this attachment to each character is likely a large part of what makes *Monkey Island* so evergreen for me. It's one of my great regrets that I don't remember how I've solved these

puzzles in the pre-internet age, if I bought a guide and what happened to it. The solutions to puzzles in any *Monkey Island* are so arbitrary that I can't imagine having solved most of them as a pre-teen without help. It's also worth noting that *The Curse of Monkey Island* isn't really an evergreen by conventional standards.

MONKEY LOVE

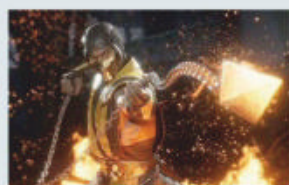
In 1998, PC Gamer put it in 33rd place on its list of the 50 best computer games ever released, but if you look at any best-of list for

STORIED LINES *Some famous quotes you might actually recognise*

"Get over here!"

– Mr Scorpion, *Mortal Kombat*

The most famous quote of the series, pronunciation is key for this one.



"I'm in the middle of some calibrations."

– Garrus Vakarian, *Mass Effect*



"Nothing is true, everything is permitted."

– Ezio Auditore, *Assassin's Creed II*

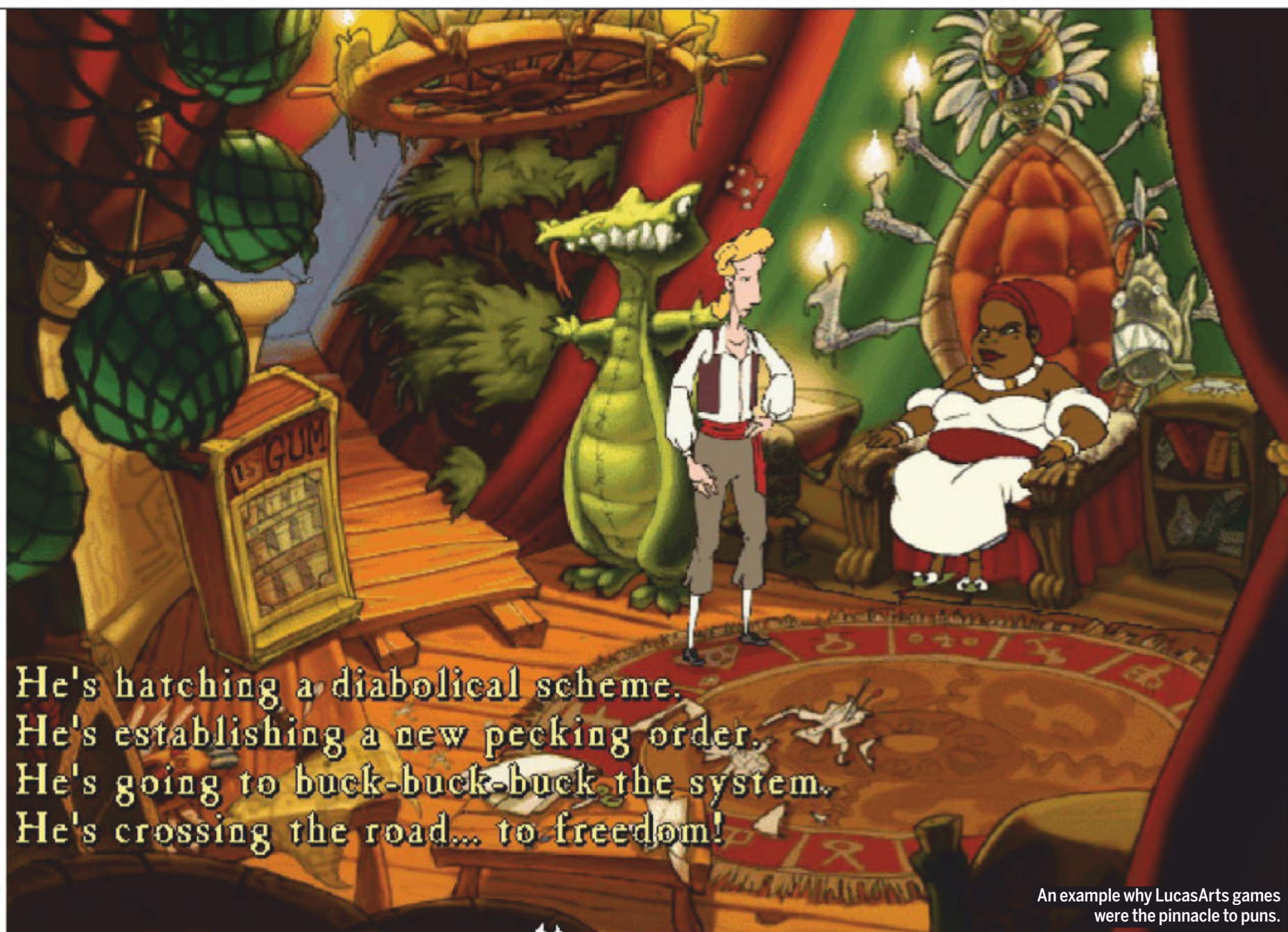


"Spaaaaaaace!"

– Space Core, *Portal 2*

A dream came true for this little guy. And he's voiced by Nolan North.





An example why LucasArts games were the pinnacle to puns.

IT WAS THE FIRST GAME I BOUGHT WITH MY OWN POCKET MONEY

adventure games now, *The Secret of Monkey Island* or *Monkey Island 2* are much more likely to appear, having left a bigger impact with players overall. It took ages to appear on digital storefronts, while its precursors were remade a decade ago. These versions allow you to play with updated graphics and voice over, or with the classic 1990s pixels.

The Curse of Monkey Island didn't need such a do-over – while I'd love to have it in HD, its 2D art style still looks fresh. It's a testament to the quality of the art that there were so many things to look at and interact with that items necessary to solve puzzles don't stand out. *MI3* was the first game in the series to feature voices, immediately setting an industry standard for great voice acting in games. Many gaming franchises have a sequel that outstrips the original, but for many fans of *Monkey Island*, the first game

will likely always be the best, making my love for this game, which doesn't necessarily extend to the rest of the series, a bit of an outlier.

I get it – both predecessors offer more of the swashbuckling adventure you expect of the pirate theme, here you mostly deal with pirate pensioners. Of course I love *MI3* for nostalgic reasons, too – from how it was the first game I bought with my own pocket money to how I was convinced that it represented a graphical pinnacle for PC gaming because the game looked exactly the way it did on the box.

LucasArts completely overhauled its SCUMM engine for one last hurrah to produce the look of *MI3*.

INSPIRATIONAL QUOTES

More interesting than the impossible question of why you fall in love with a game is how that love turns into something enduring. In my case it was *Monkey Island's* unmatched quotability. I don't mean "you fight like a cow" or anything involving three-headed monkeys.

Instead, I have a huge list of completely unsusceptible quotes everyone around me knows must

hark back to something, but no one ever bothers to ask me about. My favourites are exclamations of surprise, "Aah! Death again!" comes from Madame Xima at the Goodsoup Hotel on Blood Island – it has been my go-to to express surprise. When someone asks me to do something, I may ask them to beat me in the caber toss first. This is one of the tasks Guybrush has to cheat his way through to gain Haggis McMutton as a member of his crew. "I think I'm getting better at this," isn't much of a quote, but it's me channelling my inner Effette Lafoot, the temp lowering Guybrush to the smuggler's cave on Skull Island.

None of these quotes have meaning beyond what I've ascribed to them. You can't put them on t-shirts or posters, they don't immediately bring an image to mind, but they're the best way to always have something you love with you, reinforcing the memory of good times. While it's fun to explore my attachment to a game that isn't an obvious first choice for many people, in the end you form attachment over the weirdest things and sometimes love a game, just because. ■

TOM SENIOR



They say that if you live by the sword, you die by the sword. I say they haven't played enough *Sekiro*.



DESTINY 2

www.destinythegame.com

➔ New exotic gun quests and increasingly silly seasonal events are contributing to the happy, party atmosphere in *Destiny 2*. It's a good time to tuck in to this dazzling space FPS as, rather handily, the latest season adds level-boosting quests that let you skip dozens of hours of grinding and looting.



SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE

www.sekirothegame.com

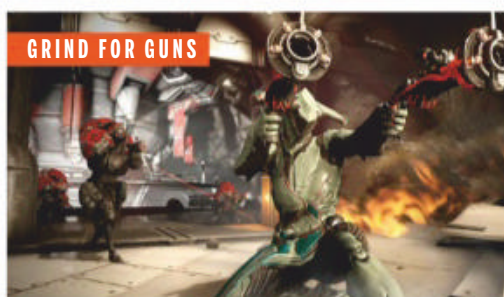
➔ Sublime swordfighting set in a colourful, dark fantasy imagining of Sengoku-era Japan. The parry system is probably going to be copied for years to come, so you might as well get the original experience. It's made by the creators of *Dark Souls*, so there's lots of detailed lore to unpick as well.



THE ROOM SERIES

www.fireproofgames.com/games/the-room-three-2

➔ I wish *The Room*'s puzzle boxes were real, but no-one could build contraptions this intricate. The fourth game, *Old Sins*, is yet to arrive on PC, but one through three are. Each has you investigating mansions full of secrets. There's a Lovecraftian vibe that grows as you solve each room.



WARFRAME

www.warframe.com

➔ Digital Extremes is overhauling level tilesets and *Warframe*'s original open world area to bring them up to date with the graphical standards of their recent expansions. The grind may be on the heavy side in this persistent online shooter, but the wild guns and strange sci-fi universe are compelling.

MUST ★ PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Tom Senior



RETURN OF THE OBRA DINN

obradinn.com

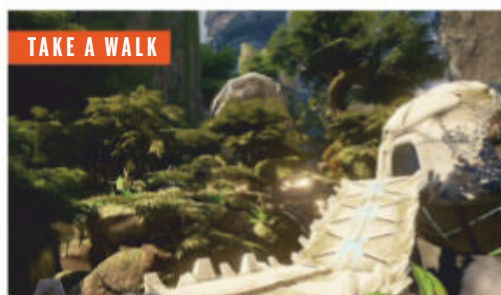
➔ *Obra Dinn*'s crime scenes, set aboard history's unluckiest ship, have me scribbling wild theories on the back of envelopes. It's a large logic puzzle set across a series of gruesome, murderous scenes. You have to correctly assess the culprit and the mode of death for each unfortunate soul.



DEVIL MAY CRY 5

www.devilmaycry5.com

➔ This brawler's gorgeous, fluid combat system is a great alternative to *Sekiro*. Build fluid combos that obliterate hordes of demons with three characters and dozens of weapons and unlockable abilities. It gets even better on your second playthrough when the game remixes the enemies in every level.



OBDUCTION

obduction.com

➔ It's not especially new, but this gentle puzzly adventure game is a pleasant refuge for *Myst* fans looking for some quiet puzzles in strange landscapes. *Obduction* even inserts FMV characters into its 3D landscapes for maximum nostalgia value, and still manages to look absolutely gorgeous.



PATH OF EXILE

www.pathofexile.com/game

➔ A gritty, complicated, enormous action RPG that can easily suck up hundreds of hours of time. *Path of Exile* is being updated all the time, and offers an extraordinary amount of value for a free to play game. This is definitely a must-play for hardcore *Diablo* fans who are looking for something new.



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